THE VICAR

BY

JOSEPH HATTON

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The Vicar

A Novel

By

Joseph Hatton

Author of "When Greek Meets Greek," "The Banishment of Jessop Blythe," etc.

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N. J. K. Oct. 19, 1906

Dedicated to the Memory of James Albery, a poet, to whose Collaboration, in a Play founded upon this Story of mine, I am indebted for several dramatic passages and for the introduction of David Macfarlane.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER PAGE

I.—"ARCADES AMBO" 5

II.—STUDYING NOX THE NAG AND MATRICULATING FOR THE DOCK 12

III.—"AND LEARNS TOO LATE THAT MEN BETRAY" 17

IV.—"JOVE SENT HER A CHAMPION" 23

V.—CUPID'S FIRST-OFFICE 28

VI.—DAVID MACFARLANE IS CROSS-EXAMINED BY LADY BESWICK 35

VII.—THE WIDOW'S PLOT 45

VIII.—CUPID AND CONFIDENTS 50

IX.—THE WIDOW AND THE MAIDEN 58

X.—KEZIAH'S WORD WITH TOM 63

XI.—LADY BESWICK AND SUSANNAH 75

XII.—"FAINT HEART NEVER WON FAIR LADY" 81

XIII.—"CHECK!" 89

XIV.—"A WICKED AND A DISAFFECTED WORLD" 97

XV.—WITHOUT GLOVES 101

XVI.—AN INVERTED MELODY 111

XVII.—LORD CLARVE'S CONFESSION TO THE VICAR 118

XVIII.—THE WIDOW'S GAME BECOMES SERIOUS 131

XIX.—LADY BESWICK AS FRIEND AND COMFORTER 137

XX.—"THERE'S NAE LUCK ABOUT THE HOUSE" 149

XXI.—"AS GOOD AS A PLAY" 152

XXII.—BETWEEN THE ARCH 160

XXIII.—THE FACE AT THE WINDOW 165

XXIV.—LUCK FINDS IS "DOWN ON HIS LUCK" 172

XXV.—LADY MELBORO MAKES HER REAPPEARANCE 175

XXVI.—DAVID MACFARLANE TELLS THE STORY OF HIS OWN AND TOM HUSSINGTREE'S ADVENTURES 188

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	"Arcades Ambo"	5
II.	Studying for the Bar and Matriculating for the Dock	12
III.	"And learns too late that Men Betray"	17
IV.	"Jove sent her a Champion"	23
V.	Cupid's Post-Office	28
VI.	David Macfarlane is cross-examined by Lady Berwick	35
VII.	The Widow's Plot	45
VIII.	Gifts and Compliments	50
IX.	The Widow and the Maiden	58
X.	Keziah's Word with Tom	68
XI.	Lady Berwick and Susannah	73
XII.	"Faint Heart never won Fair Lady"	81
XIII.	"Check!"	89
XIV.	"A Wicked and a Disappointing World"	97
XV.	Without Gloves	101
XVI.	An Interrupted Melody	111
XVII.	Lord Cleeve's Confession to the Vicar	118
XVIII.	The Widow's Game becomes Serious	131
XIX.	Lady Berwick as Friend and Comforter	137
XX.	"There's nae Luck about the House"	146
XXI.	"As Good as a Play"	152
XXII.	Between the Acts	160
XXIII.	The Face at the Window	165
XXIV.	Luke Fenton is "Down on His Luck"	172
XXV.	Lizzie Melford makes her Reappearance	175
XXVI.	David Macfarlane tells the Story of His Own and Tom Hussingtree's Adventures	188

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXVII.	"Still harping on my Daughter"	198
XXVIII.	After a Lonely Dinner	205
XXIX.	The Fascinating Privileges of Widowhood	214
XXX.	The Vicar accepts Lady Berwick's Invitation to Town	226
XXXI.	The Return of the Prodigal	234
XXXII.	An Eventful Night	241
XXXIII.	Problems and Lovers	254
XXXIV.	Susannah cross-examines Lady Berwick	263
XXXV.	The Visit to London	273
XXXVI.	Of a Certain Reception in Grosvenor Square	284
XXXVII.	To the Music of Symphony and Song	292
XXXVIII.	"All the World's a Stage"	302
XXXIX.	Susannah's Secret	311

THE VICAR

CHAPTER I.

"ARCADES AMBO."

"LET us call it a council of war, on the eve of retreat," said Mr. Jim Renshaw, who in playful moments alluded to himself as a soldier of fortune, and when he was serious, or affected to be, as a man of the world.

"I wish one could recall the first advance in our latest campaign," Tom replied, his manner suggesting recklessness rather than despair.

Indeed, Tom Hussingtree, the Vicar of Comberton-cum-Besford's only son, was a picture of optimistic youth, with a hint, however, of "the pace that kills" in the tired expression of his eyes and the feverish shiver with which he handled a strong cigar that he was rather chewing than smoking.

"Do you? I don't," was the defiant reply. "I neither regret the mistakes of the campaign nor glory in its victories. Life's a game as well as a battle. One must not be too elated with victory, nor whimper over defeat. The great thing is to lose with a laugh and win without a smile."

Mr. Renshaw rolled a cigarette as he spoke, with the grace and skill of a Spaniard.

"If I had lived in the days of Claude Duval," he

went on, "I should have been what they called a gentleman of the road, and if I had been a good sailor I would have been a pirate on the high seas."

"Making your final exit at Tyburn, eh?"

"I should have taken the chances. I am taking them now. In those days, when you retreated, you had not to run as far as is necessary to-day. You just changed your road from Hounslow to the Midlands, and from the Midlands to the North, gradually working back again to Hampstead, taking Bath by way of a breather en route."

"You seem to have studied what they call the good old days, Jim?"

"Yes, know them backwards, sea-sharks and land-sharks, down to Jack Sheppard and Jonathan Wild," replied Jim; "and there was always a sneaking Jew on the scene, as there is just now with me—and you too, Tom."

"You mean old Abrahams! Oh, as men go, he's a good sort, I think. Any fellow that lends another fellow money when he's hard up is entitled to be treated with respect."

"Abrahams has grown rich on usury."

"He must be an abnormally clever Jew if he can make anything out of such clients as you and me."

"Nonsense, it is such as us that fill his pockets. He has made an income out of me these five years."

"Really, I shouldn't have thought it," said Tom.

"No, you're not a fellow to look below the surface; you are one of the easy-going sort, come-day, go-day; but you've got a good backer, you see."

"My dear old misguided father? It might have been better for me if he had possessed a wider knowledge of the world and less confidence in his only son."

"He is certainly rather verdant; but you have always an open road of escape from your troubles."

"Have I? Will you be good enough to point it out on the map of my destiny?"

"The Vicar's ward, your chaste Susannah."

"The most forlorn of forlorn hopes!" said Tom.

"Why?" asked his companion, stretching his legs across the fireplace, where half a scuttle of coals was trying to burn its way through a pyramid of cinders.

"I don't know that she cares a button for me, and she doesn't fetch me one bit. Mind you, she's pretty and dresses well and has a pleasant manner; but I look upon her as a kind of relation; I was never in love with her, never was in love with girls, always with women."

"Lady Berwick is not a girl and would be a catch; but in your shoes I should first go for Susannah Woodcote."

"It is a religion with my dreamy old governor that she shall marry any one but me, that is if the other fellow is a gentleman, loves her honestly and is worthy of her."

"Poor dear old Vicar."

"Once Lady Berwick had the temerity to hint at me as a match for Susannah, and he flew at her; never saw him really angry before. No, my friend, Susannah is a trust, she and her fortune, and my father would think it a breach of honour to give me a chance at it."

"Hum," said Jim, lighting a fresh cigarette, "it's a pity the little girl at the Homestead is not rich."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say, pity she has not money."

"Whom do you mean?"

"Lizzie Melford."

"And who told you about Lizzie Melford?" asked Tom, rising from his seat.

"The letters you left lying on your table the other day."

"You don't mean to say you read them?"

"I thought you placed them in my way for no other purpose. She writes a good letter."

"You ought not to have read them," said Tom, with a passing frown.

"The truth is when I did so I said to myself, 'Tom ought not to show me all his love letters.'"

"You are certainly original in your views of social ethics," Tom replied, laughing in spite of himself. He was not altogether sorry to have an excuse for telling his companion in profligacy what a dark-eyed beauty Lizzie was—of all his conquests the most desirable; though he feared it would end badly.

"Why, of course it will," said the other; "everything connected with women ends badly."

"I sometimes think it was an unfortunate thing for me that my mother died before I could have the benefit of her good influence."

"Oh, oh!" laughed Jim, "he wants to tell the judge and jury that he was deprived in early youth of the tender care of a loving and religious mother."

"You are a fiend, Jim, a fiend!"

"So was Mephistopheles, but he gave Faust a good time, didn't he? I am not as exacting as Mephistopheles. I would like you to marry well, live gloriously, and go to heaven at last—and I have helped you to understand and enjoy the delights of the town, eh, not to mention our trip to Paris; now, have I not?"

"Yes," said Tom. "Open a bottle of fizz; the thought of it makes me thirsty."

Jim opened a bottle of champagne that stood handy with others on a slatternly side-board, and emptied it into a couple of pewter mugs. Tom touched the other's cup as he drank, and Jim said, "Success to roguery" —it was a common toast among the set they knew best —drunk by some for mere bravado, youngsters who thought it the thing to seem devils of fellows, and by others with a right down hearty relish.

"It seems to me, Tom, that you have educated your father badly. I wish I had had such a father."

"You could not have made a more cruel use of his kind heart than I have. It cuts me to the quick when I think of it. Oh, yes, I have my remorseful moments. I sometimes wish I had never seen Lizzie Melford; then I am mad that I can't stand up and say, 'This is the girl I'm going to marry!'"

"Stuff! One doesn't marry that kind of girl; the daughter of your father's servant, and without a penny."

"No, of course not," said Tom. "Mind you, I never promised her I would."

"You are not always so scrupulous."

"You seem to be rubbing it into me to-night, Jim; is it for my good, or what? It doesn't tend to raise my spirits. And I've been thinking a lot about my father to-day. I'm well on the way to bring his grey hairs to the grave, as they say in that old book you and I know too little about."

"Oh, is that your mood? Very well, old chap; you will be free from to-night to study it and reform, so far as I am concerned. I'm off in the morning."

"Off?"

"Yes. We'll take our last chances at poker and

crack our last bottle on this side of the Atlantic to-night. I sail to-morrow afternoon for New York, I and my wife."

"Your wife?"

"I forgot you didn't know that I was married. You are such a taciturn chap. You never asked me if I was single or married."

"Never asked you! Poor creature, what a time she must have had!"

"Now you understand why I have quitted your fascinating society once a week or so."

"Once a month, you mean."

"Oh, you have noticed my goings and comings, then. The truth is, Tom, my bolt is shot; my game is up. I must change the scene of my operations. America offers a wider scope for such talents as I possess; and, besides, old Father Abrahams has got me in a cleft stick. You are entitled to my confidence, and I know you won't betray me. Besides, I want your assistance. You have heard me speak of Haxell?"

"The man you hate?"

"No; the man who hates me. My wife was Mrs. Haxell. At least she said so. I cut Haxell out. Latterly he has made a heap of money in Afrikanders. He was always a knowing chap. As for me, I never could get on in the City."

"Nor I; nor anywhere else, for that matter."

"Oh, come! You have done well at odd times on the Turf; and you are lucky at loo, not to mention poker; but America's the home of poker, and I flatter myself I know the game."

"Yes?" said Tom, with a languid note of interrogation, his mind just then at the vicarage of Comberton,—such a contrast to the den he occupied in the

Temple, with pipes, sticks, guns, boxing-gloves, cards, overcoats, rugs, portmanteaus, pictures of ballet-girls, and flash French prints as decorations, and Jim Renshaw for his companion—Jim, a young man, with hair that was prematurely grey, heavy jaw, bright eyes, a sensual mouth, a strongly built frame, and a not unpleasant manner, and with a powerful influence over Tom Hussingtree. Tom was the only son of one of the dearest and kindest clergymen that ever lived, unsophisticated, genial, true to his mission, of generous and liberal instincts, handsome, distinguished, a man of honour, and by birth and training a gentleman.

"But this is what I want to say, Tom. We have had a good time, have seen life—you wanted to see it, you know, when we met two years ago at Oxford—and the race is run. This day fortnight the first of my last series of bills becomes due ; and it is in the hands of Haxell."

"But——"

"Yes, I know. I have had no dealings with any other than Abrahams. He has sold my paper to Haxell, who is going to give himself the treat of a vengeful action. Well, she is worth it, and I didn't behave too well ; who does when there's a woman in the case?"

"No, who does?" said Tom, with a sigh.

"Now you are thinking of Chloe, otherwise Lizzie M. I know you are. Well, marry her, or transplant her. If all you say is true, she might be worth the sacrifice ; young, pretty, a shining light in Lady Berwick's Sunday-school, and loves you madly !"

"I could never settle down and live with her as a fellow lives with his wife. I don't know why I couldn't, but somehow nothing contents me for more than a day or two together ; I begin to think it's remorse."

CHAPTER II.

STUDYING FOR THE BAR AND MATRICULATING FOR THE DOCK.

"REMORSE be hanged!" exclaimed Renshaw, with an ironical laugh. "It's luxury, the restlessness of the spoiled child, the vanity of the buck, the love of conquest. All the women say you are devilish handsome; and so you are, Tom. If I possessed your innocent smile, I'd have married a duchess and been a lord lieutenant of my county by now—wasn't Pitt Premier by the time he was my age?"

"Don't be a fool, Jim. If I had your abilities, I would not be dodging creditors, haunting gambling hells, and calling it studying for the Bar! By Jupiter, sometimes I think I am matriculating for the dock!"

"My abilities! And where have they brought me? To the feet of my bitterest enemy, with my bills in his pocket!"

"Well, he can't hang you. They don't even imprison fellows for debt any longer."

"If we had lived in the days we were talking of he could have hanged me, and to-day he could make it penal servitude."

"What!" exclaimed Tom, starting to his feet. "You don't mean to say——"

"That is exactly what I do mean to say. Two of them are forgeries, and you have backed them—the one more particularly that comes due this day fortnight

—accessory after the fact, or something of the kind they call it.''

''Do you claim that I am responsible with you?''

''No, Tom, not that; you can easily prove your innocence; but——''

''What is the amount?''

''Five hundred pounds.''

''And the other one?''

''Two hundred; a mere bagatelle once, but latterly I've no luck; any fool can play me.''

''And Abrahams knows of the forgery?''

''He can square the drawer, who will swear the signature is his own; but it will take more than I can raise in a year, and I'm sick of the infernal thing; it's been on my back this three months. If I got out of it, Haxell would hunt me to death. He carries too many guns for me at present. I must retreat. Lend me a hand, and, as there's a heaven above us, I'll send you the first pile I make on the other side! And now, come out. Let's try our luck once more at Hallette's; there's big company there. Who knows? Sometimes it is the last throw that redeems all; I've known it so at Monte Carlo more than once.—Come on, old fellow; and we'll finish up at the Soho, the one Club left that the police don't raid and where a gentleman may breakfast in peace after an all-night sitting.''

''I think Lady Berwick will lend me the money,'' said Tom.

''Why, of course she will; you paid her the two-fifty?''

''Yes; and she seemed surprised, I am bound to say.''

''Didn't want it, eh?''

''Pretended she had forgotten it. Open another bottle, Jim; you have upset me awfully.''

"I knew I should," Jim replied, twisting the wire of a bottle of Mumm and dragging the cork out with a vicious tug. "I'm upset myself. It's devilish hard to have to go into exile. Where is your friend, the charming widow, now?"

"Lady Berwick?"

"Yes; my Lady of Powyke, as you sometimes call her," Jim replied, filling up his own and Tom's beaker.

"Oh, she's at home, I suppose."

"Grosvenor Square?"

"No, Powyke House; she always goes there at Easter and stays until the middle of May, when she considers the London season is in full swing and she cuts in with her big receptions."

"I've often thought if ever I married——"

"You said you were married," interrupted Tom.

"I mean in downright earnest. Then I think I should marry a widow. In love, the Frenchman says, old wood burns better than green. It would be a fine partnership, you and Lady Berwick. She would take care of you."

"I should as soon think of proposing to—well, heaven knows who!—as to approach Lady Berwick."

"You have borrowed money from her?"

"She's an old friend, and before I asked her for that two-fifty she had encouraged me to do so; said she knew the Vicar didn't allow me enough, remarked that the Vicar didn't know the world, and so on."

"And she must think you a good deal of a goose not to have at least done a youngster's homage to her beauty. Ah, well, for some fellows the tide is always at the flood, and they let it run. She didn't like me. I must have been a good deal of a mug the night you

took me to dinner. Has she ever mentioned me to you?"

"Yes, several times."

"Warned you against me?"

"Yes."

"Of course. I might have known that. She is not the immaculate Madame you believe down at Comberton-cum-Besford. What a deliciously innocent old-world name for a place! No, Tom, she is not all the Vicar's unsophisticated fancy paints her. You see, we know each other at sight, we men and women of the world, we intriguers, we who make life our pastime and not our misery. There is a freemasonry among clever people; and Lady Berwick and I are clever people. Oh, yes, we are. She has been more successful than I have. But she's a woman; a woman has so many chances. And now she's a widow. Oh, the privileges of the widow! What's this new photographic machine, the Something rays? Well, the widow and I can see through each other without any such scientific interposition."

"I think I am beginning to see through a brick wall a little further than I used, Jim," said the younger of the two, with a forced laugh.

"Time and patience built the Pyramids," said Jim. "I wish I had cultivated the art of patience! Come out, old chap; let's do something. What's the good of sitting here, discounting the impossible?"

"All right, Jim; you've made me feel that I don't care a brass farthing for anything or anybody to-night. —Here's to Fortune!—a short life and a merry one, as your model swell of the road has it."

Tom emptied the remainder of the wine into the pewter mugs, and, without waiting for his companion to

join in the toast, tossed off his liquor and dragged an overcoat from a peg behind the door. Jim Renshaw gathered his thick tweed cloak about his shoulders, and presently the two adventurers were running before the wind—for Newgate eventually, Tom said, with a hollow laugh—but for the moment to one of the few notable gambling clubs of the Metropolis where baccarat, loo, and poker are still played without restriction.

CHAPTER III.

"AND LEARNS TOO LATE THAT MEN BETRAY."

IT was the kind of cottage that Birket Foster loved to paint. Nature, and an unconscious feeling for art in the builder, had composed the picture. It was a dream, such as townsmen have, of rural beauty, gathered from illustrated magazines and pictorial annotations of Goldsmith and Miss Mitford. The surrounding hills and trees vignetted it against the sky, and it had an atmosphere of its own, perfumed with gillyflowers and a suggestion of fresh milk and butter. Constable would have found the subject lacking in boldness. It would have been too pretty for him, the backing of elms too soft in their Spring buds, the lilacs too bushy, the thatch too trim, and the whole scene wanting in ruggedness; though to one heart, at the opening of this story, it was sombre enough; to one heart the sunshine of it had faded, the sweetness of it had suddenly become a bitter memory.

The Vicar was proud of the cottage. He loved old things; had a Conservative feeling for thatch and timber, for old window-seats and raddled flower-pots, for rosemary and thyme, for wall-flowers, single tulips, hollyhocks and herb-gardens. All these were in perfection at the Homestead; and he was continually offering the old-fashioned garden as an example to his man at the Vicarage, who prided himself upon a higher order of horticulture in competition with his rival, the head gardener of their neighbour, the Lady of Powyke.

One meets with what is called the timbered house right through the heart of the Midlands ; and Macfarlane's cottage, otherwise known as the Homestead, was a picturesque example of the old English style.

Under the management of David Macfarlane, the Reverend John Hussingtree, Vicar of Comberton-cum-Besford, farmed some hundred acres of arable land. The Homestead boasted a dairy and a kitchen-garden that might have rivalled the Home Farm of Lord Cleeve's fine establishment, some dozen miles beyond the Breedon Hills.

The Homestead spread its thatched porch and its two rustic wings over a spacious plot of land. It was a two-storey house, with a quaint old parlour and a spacious kitchen that gave evidence of housewifely management and a generous landlord. Though the Vicar was tenant, freeholder, owner, and everything to the Macfarlanes, their Providence in fact, he had come to be regarded as little more than landlord by his bailiff and manager, David, and his old servant's second wife. The Vicar was an indulgent master, but Macfarlane was scrupulously honest and made the little farm a profitable enterprise.

What might be called the gem of this timbered cottage, the heart and soul of the rustic setting of thatch and cross-beams, of orchard and garden, was Lizzie Melford, Macfarlane's step-daughter, dark as a gypsy, vain, frivolous, self-denying, naturally clever, fond of finery, a daughter of Mother Eve, but gifted with too generous a disposition for her own welfare. Beauty and generosity combined have proved sorrowful endowment to many loving women.

"It's very hard on both of us," Lizzie was saying to Tom Hussingtree on a Spring afternoon, sitting in

the parlour of the Homestead, while Mrs. Macfarlane had gone to the Vicarage, and David, Lizzie's step-father, was making the best of his way to Powyke House, whither he had been summoned by his sister Keziah, who was the confidential maid of Lady Berwick. "I don't know what to do!"

She looked up into the young reprobate's face, the tears trembling in her eyes. "I sometimes think I'll kill myself; then I try to forget all about it, and fancy it is a dream."

A pitiful apologetic kind of smile crept into the corners of her handsome mouth, and Tom stooped to kiss her.

"Ah, you do love me, Tom!" she said. "Couldn't we be secretly married? I would never tell, and it would be a great comfort to me."

"It would be sure to get out," he replied; "and, besides, I haven't a penny in the world. I'm a good deal of a scamp, Lizzie; my father may live twenty or thirty years yet, and I'm up to my head and ears in debt, both at Oxford and in London. I hate myself, Lizzie."

He did nothing of the kind. He loved himself, even better than his dead mother had loved him, if that were possible.

"I don't want to drag you down, of course, Tom," said the generous girl; "I quite understand what a mistake it has all been. I'm glad my father is not alive to know of my disgrace; he was very proud and passionate, my father."

"But it need never be known; it can be managed, I'm sure," he said, sitting by her side and looking steadily at his boots.

"Oh, Tom!" she exclaimed, laying her head upon

his shoulder, "couldn't we go away to some far country and live together? I would work for you, slave for you, do anything you wished, never trouble you, and away beyond the seas you would be free of your debts, and, who knows, you might become rich, as others have done—look at Jonathan Corbet, who went away with Kitty Welsh, only six years back; they saved, and he has come home to Comberton and bought Perry House Farm."

Lizzie Melford had never before been so loquacious. Her tongue ran along as if it would never stop.

"Besides, dear, I do try to give you up, to feel that you must marry in your station, as you have said. I know from the first you never promised to marry me, Tom; I know, dear, though I had a hope you might. Don't be impatient with me. It was enough that you loved me, and I was so ignorant of the world; so very ignorant, never further from home than Wulstan, and it was so heavenly to sit and hear you tell of Oxford and London, and to meet you without any one knowing, and my mother is such a trial, and has been ever since she married again; why she married David Macfarlane, to go and despise him the next minute, is a mystery to me."

Then she burst into tears and sobbed, and almost immediately wiped her eyes and laughed and begged Tom not to mind her, she was not quite herself, hadn't seen him for more than a fortnight, and in all that time he had only once left a little note for her in the alder tree, where Time had made a letter-box for them, and Tom had dropped notes therein for his "Dearest" and she had replied to them through the same medium. It had all been so romantic and sweet to her—and so cunning and devilish on his part, though he was perhaps

less vicious than thoughtless and selfish ; it had seemed to him a feather in his cap to win this pretty creature, who was the rural belle of Comberton, sang in the choir, taught in her humble way at Lady Berwick's Sunday-school, and was so dainty, piquant, and unworldly.

"Look here, Lizzie, my girl, it's no good going on like that. We've got to face the music, as an American friend of mine says ; and I've explained the situation to you. You must go on a visit to Granny Dene, not for a day but for a week or two—by the way, what relation is she to you ?"

"She's my father's grandmother ; I'm her great-grandchild."

"She must be very old."

"Not so very ; but so good, I could never dare to confess my shame to her."

"But when you have met me at Wulstan you have said you had been there."

"Yes, I know ; and I have only been on a visit to the poor old dear about three times in my life."

"I'll go and see her, and arrange it ; Macfarlane's my friend, and I believe I can get him to help me."

Lizzie hid her face in her hands and slipped into the corner of the settle near the fireplace, overcome with shame at this suggestion of making her step-father acquainted with their secret. Tom did not allow the manifestation of her anguish to interrupt his proposals.

"You could easily say you were not feeling well, and Macfarlane could be of opinion that a change of air would be good for you ; and I could get Granny to send a letter inviting you there—and you could either go there or somewhere else, and——"

But Lizzie was not listening. She had flung her

apron over her head, and was weeping silently but persistently. Tom was not used to this kind of emotion. Hitherto Lizzie had faced her trouble with courage, if not always with cheerfulness. He hated tears and fuss, and he told her so.

"It's no good, you know, Lizzie: it's a bad business, but it might be worse, and I'll never desert you, whatever happens. You will always have my love, don't you know, and all that."

She made no reply, only rocked herself to and fro.

"You are quite wrong, you know, in thinking that I am likely to marry Miss Woodcote; there is not the slightest chance of that."

"She's very rich; you could pay all your debts," said the girl. "I know it is not for me to stand in your way."

"I don't care a button for her; she's a prim Miss Nancy, and the Vicar would never hear of it. Besides, I don't know that I shall ever marry anybody."

"Supposing I were rich?" sobbed the girl.

"But you are not, Lizzie; and your being poor would make no difference, if I were only rich myself instead of being just dependent on the Vicar, and no good at anything; couldn't earn my living anyhow, unless I became a stable-help or a steeple-chase rider, or something in that way."

Lizzie went on rocking herself and trying to think of some way out of the maze in which her thoughts were wandering.

"My dear Lizzie, mind you, I have not said I won't marry you—some day!"

CHAPTER IV.

"JOVE SENT HER A CHAMPION."

THE heartless scapegrace expected this burst of generosity to bring her to her feet and straightway into his arms. It did not.

"The Vicar will be so disappointed," she said, dropping her apron and wiping her eyes, "and my mother's pride will have such a fall! I don't know that I care for myself very much; it is all my own fault, I know that—all my own fault, silly, vain idiot!"

"Don't say all your own fault; I am most to blame, but it was impossible to resist your bright eyes and your sweet lips."

"Oh, why did heaven make women such poor creatures!"

"And men such damned cowards!" exclaimed a strong voice that struck them both like a blow.

"Luke Fenton!" exclaimed Lizzie, starting to her feet.

"Aye, Luke Fenton," said a man who had opened the door so quietly that they were unconscious of his presence until he had spoken.

"You scoundrel!" said Tom, facing him. "What do you mean?"

"What do I mean?" said the man, with slow deliberation. "I mean that you are a damned scoundrel, and I've a mind to break every bone in your body!"

Tom sprang forward at the challenge, but Lizzie stood between them.

"For God's sake!" she said, clutching the man by the arm. "Luke! oh dear, Luke, don't!"

"Let him go," said Tom; "two can play at his game."

"Yes, but only one at yours, you blackguard—step another yard nearer, and I'll kill you!"

Lizzie flung herself upon Luke, and Tom stepped back. There was that in Luke Fenton's eye and manner that might have made an honest man quail, let alone Tom Hussingtree.

"Begone, before I do you a mischief!" said the man. "Get out of this. Heaven may help me to calm down, but not yet.—Out you go!"

"Go, Tom," said Lizzie; "go, dear; Luke is mad; for my sake, go. I will come to you."

"For your sake," said Tom; and he walked down the garden-path, among the bordering beds of gilly-flowers, daffodils, and primroses, with as much dignity as he could command; it was not much.

"What do you mean by this?" said Lizzie, turning upon Luke as soon as Tom had disappeared.

"What do you mean, that's the question?"

"How dare you come and make such a scene?"

"How dare you make it possible! Oh, Lizzie, I would have lost you a thousand times, done time for you, as the convicts say, anything but to know what you have sacrificed to this brute, and to hear how he rewards you!"

"You had no right to hear; you are an eaves-dropper."

"It is the bitterest eaves-dropping I am ever likely to do, if I live to be a thousand, which, thank God, is impossible. And I loved you, Lizzie; loved you, doated on you. Great God! What have I not done

to win you—worked, read, studied, sat in classes at the Sunday-school, given up public-houses, taught myself all manner of things, saved money out of jobs done for folk in the village, mended their shoes, cleaned their clocks, done gardening, kept books, and all the time my inclinations have been far from such work—but my heart was here. If I had had a rival and he had beaten me, won you, got you honestly, and you had preferred him, it would have been hard to bear ; but to have you made common, to be the sport and toy of this flip-jack, this cur in broadcloth, this skunk, who has not even the manliness to protect you, and, if he did not make you his wife, to shield you from the cruel world, to be kind to you, to sympathise with you—why did I not strangle him where he stood ?''

Luke's passion gradually spent itself in words. He burst into tears ; and Lizzie looked at him in fear and trembling, and her heart was touched.

''Oh, Luke, forgive me !'' she said. ''It breaks my heart to see you cry ; a man's tears are tears of blood. Oh, Luke, I am unworthy of them !''

''Don't speak to me !'' was all he could say, convulsed, as he was, with grief. ''Don't speak to me ; I shall get better soon. I pity you.''

She went to the window and looked up at the sky. A thrush was piping his heart out to his mate in the elms that shaded the cottage.

She could not bear it. Everything was so bright. The sun was going down in a glory of gold. The perfume from the garden met her. It should have crept into her soul like a benediction ; it afflicted her like a curse.

''I'm sorry my passion got the mastery of me,'' said Luke, in a humble tone of voice. ''I'm not

given to such moods. You must let me help you.''

''Oh, no, I cannot.''

''You must. I can do it now, coolly and workmanlike, as if you were only an ordinary friend.''

''What do you mean?''

''What I felt for you, up to half an hour ago, has passed out of my heart, but there remains the kind of pity, the kind of love the Saviour felt; it is above all considerations of self and the world, and I will protect you, Lizzie Melford, and shield you, and——''

''No, no, Luke; it must not be; I am not worth your consideration. I shall manage. As one makes one's bed, so one must lie upon it. I thank you all the same, Luke. I wish I could have loved you, you are a good man.''

''Nay; I am what you have made me, Lizzie. But for you, I should have been a village loafer, perhaps a drunkard—worse, who knows?—for my temper rides me hard, even now, with all the restraint my love for you has taught me to put upon it.''

''Luke, let me kiss your hand,'' she said; and she covered his great brown hand with her tears.

''Don't, dear—don't!'' he said. ''I'll go now, but I'll come again. Have no fear, I'll stand by you.''

He closed the door softly behind him, and, seeing Mrs. Macfarlane coming up the garden-path, he left by the kitchen and went towards the village, under the elms. He was a man some ten years older than Lizzie Melford, respected by everybody, and known to be over head and ears in love with Lizzie, and with very little chance, it was thought, of making any lasting impression on that fickle coquette, for so she was regarded. The men admired her, the boys were in love

with her, and most of the women envied her—some of them hated her.

She rivalled the Vicar's ward in beauty, though it was of an entirely different type. There is the beauty of the rose and the beauty of the lily. There is the flower that you gather: "Smell it, kiss it, wear it—at last throw away."

CHAPTER V.

CUPID'S POST-OFFICE.

"Am I to understand that I follow ye?" asked David Macfarlane, as he paused on the threshold of the drawing-room at Powyke House to address his sister Keziah, who had preceded him from the butler's pantry.

"Yes; ye needna' be afraid; my mistress wants to see ye," Keziah replied, turning her diplomatic face upon him with an expression of impatience.

"My buits are nae clean," said David, apologetically, entering the room with a hesitating step, and surveying what he conceived to be the holy of holies sacred to the Lady of Powyke and her most intimate guests.

"Ye are nae sae particular at the Vicarage," said Keziah, with a snap of her thin lips.

"I'm mair familiar wi' his Riverence," David replied. "I nivver thocht to mak' the acquaintance of Lady Berwick in her ain apairtment."

"Her ain apairtment!" said Keziah, scornfully. "You're a very simple man, David."

"And I ken the Veecar a'maist like a freend; and Tobias Frost, the English butler, is that respectfu' to me, I might be the Veecar's equal, instead of his gardener and manager of his wee bit fairm."

"Stop ditherin' wi' yer hat, and sit doon," said Keziah, indicating a Chippendale arm-chair that was standing upon a Persian rug, which looked the richer for its border of parqueted floor.

"Sit upon sic a thing as that!" said Macfarlane, with a fearsome look at the chair and its artistic environment. "Eh, but what for d'ye bring me into sic an apairtment as this; kitchen's the place to see me in whateffer, or at the maist hoosekeeper's parlour."

"The kitchen!" exclaimed Keziah. "As if Lady Berwick had been in the kitchen in a' her life, beyond Christmas time, and Easter may be, when she's not in town; the kitchen! Sit ye doon, I tell ye, David, and make yersel' at home."

"The mischief be on yer ain head, Keziah, if I break anything."

"The kitchen, indeed!" repeated Keziah, setting her cap to rights by the aid of a mirror, that to Macfarlane's eye only repeated the room in a bewildering vista of tables, cabinets, and pictures. "D'ye think I've been my lady's confidential maid a' these years, and know her history backwards, and I canna' ask my ain brither to sit doon in the drawing-room when she wants to talk wi' him?"

"It's true I'm yer brither, Keziah, but my poseetion isna' what yer ain is, and I've nae yer capaceety to rise in the world; and besides, ye're just a toon lady; ye gang to London ance or twice a year, and are that grand ye've lost the music o' yer native tongue, and the manners o' the Sooth seem to come to ye natural; but it's different wi' me——"

"What's the good o' talking in a language naebody understands? I dinna' love Scotland the less that I speak English."

"Nay, but I just mak' a compromise mysel'; it's a kind of a mixture that I'm speaking; they'd find it deeficult to compreehend me at hame, and I dinna'

make mysel' understood to some o' the ignorant bodies o' Comberton."

"Ye did very well to leave home, David. The happiest part o' my life's been spent this side the border; though I used to enjoy the days the late Sir Leicester Berwick had his shooting-box and we spent August and September among the hills and the heather."

"Ou ay'," said David, with a groan that did not mean suffering, but joy. "Ou ay', it was just fine that. I mind me, when I was a lad I was caddie to Maister Macnamara, and when the golfing was nae on I went oot wi' the dog-cairt and Maister Sandy, the keeper, to the moor near by auld Macgregor's cottage; d'ye mind the spot, Keziah?"

"Right weel, David," said Keziah, with a smile in her light blue eyes, that rarely laughed, except in a diplomatic way when she was in council with Lady Berwick.

"Ou ay'," said David, with another unctuous groan.

"And if ye'd been the shrewd man that Master Sandy was, ye'd have possessed a holding of yer own and been a keeper too, wi' money laid up; but ye never did keep yer eyes open, David, nor yer ears either, for that matter."

"Ah weel, it's just as gude a thing to ken how to keep 'em shut sometimes," Macfarlane replied, with an air of self-gratulation.

"That's true," said Keziah; "discretion's a virtue with Lady Berwick; bear it in mind, David, bear it in mind."

"I dinna' gainsay ye," Macfarlane answered; "and I wish ye could gie yer niece a wee bit o' yer ain abundance o' that grand commodity; it would be a warld o' use till her."

"Why, what's the matter at the farm?"

"Weel, it's Maister Tom," said David, looking at his boots and the dusty mark they had made on the Persian rug.

"The Vicar's son?"

Keziah spoke with a sharp accentuation of her superfluous question, and a flash of colour illuminated her freckles.

"Aye; and do what I will, I canna' help bein' as fond o' him as if he were my ain."

"Your ain, indeed! It's a good thing for the world at large that ye never had a son; it's bad enough that you're step-father to a piece o' vanity like Lizzie."

"I dinna' feel the reesponsibility o' a father till her; and if I did, she's ower michty to put up wi' my authority."

"Is Master Tom following her?"

"It's keepin' company her mither ca's it."

"Keeping company! How long has this been going on?"

"A matter o' months I'm afeared. Her mither thocht it was the shorthorns he came to see, and to me he was interested in the bit timber we was felling. But he'd just ither fish to fry, as the sayin' is."

"Does the Vicar know of it?"

"Nae: it's just a great secret; and there's ither secrets," said David, again contemplating his boots.

"Tell me all about it," she said, in a quick, authoritative way, her arms akimbo and her eyes flashing.

"It's sair troubled I am," said Macfarlane, not in the least responding to Keziah's alert manner. "I dinna' ken which is the maist tae blame, but I'm thinkin' it's Lizzie; she leads him on, and she's been

wearin' roond her neck a bauble o' gowd that he brocht her frae London."

"Lizzie's a fool!"

"Her mither's telt her sae mony's the time, but she's sae wi'fu'; and ye must admit she's sae weel faured and has a lauch that's like music," said Macfarlane, his wizened face for a moment lighting up with a passing glow of appreciation.

"Sae well favoured!" exclaimed Keziah, with a frown.

"And Maister Tom's sae freendly, and I dinna' ken which is maist fond o' him, she or mysel'."

"Nor which is the greatest fool among the lot of ye! Why doesna' Lizzie take pattern by her elders? I'd like to see Master Tom dare to gie me a bauble to wear round my neck!"

"Ou ay'," said Macfarlane, with a chuckle, and though Keziah was not by any means without personal attractions to Macfarlane, she was "a weird sister," to quote one of his stock phrases, and he had always feared her.

Keziah was a spare active woman of forty, with bright beady eyes, a strong chin and a sallow complexion. She became her position well as the maid of a clever, popular, and knowing lady, the Lady Bountiful of Powyke House and the mistress of an establishment in Grosvenor Square that was known to what is called "the smartest set in town."

"There's naething to be gained by keepin' things back frae ye, Keziah; sin' ye ask the question. I fear it's serious, what's gaein' on between them; it's maistly come aboot this last month that Maister Tom's been doon frae London. When he is nae on hand at the cottage, he's hangin' aboot auld alder tree, i' the

meadow ayont the garden ; and ance he took a letter oot o' the hollow of it ; and I ken it must ha'e been frae Lizzie, and they've just made what they ca's a Coopid's Post-Office oot o' that unsuspectin' bit o' timber.''

''The deevil take Master Tom! I'll ha'e a word wi' him !''

''I fear he is nae the Christian young man he was,'' continued Macfarlane, his tongue wagging easily enough now that it had fairly started. ''He goes to White Hart mair than's gude for him, body and soul, gamin' and bettin' ; and I dinna' like the companions he brings doon frae London when there's a run wi' the Croome Hoonds that is convenient to Wulstan. But he has a brave cheerfu' speerit for a' that, and youth will be youth ; and I ken weel the time when I was a lad mysel'——''

''Oh, never mind that !'' said Keziah, interrupting him. ''That's past and gone many a year. Just keep your mind on the present day and your eye on Lizzie —and watch that tree.''

''Coopid's Post-Office ?'' said Macfarlane, the pride of authorship in his eye ; for it was a happy thought to so name the old tree with its natural letter-box.

''Cupid's Post-Office !'' exclaimed Keziah, turning upon him with a severe glance. ''I mean the alder tree ; it's nae sae light a matter that you should gie it a fancy name.''

''It's naethin' mair nor less, I'm thinkin', for a' that whateffer,'' Macfarlane replied, hugging his original idea ; ''and there's nae fixed hours for claesin' it, which is the deeficulty wi' the ordinary Post.''

''Oot wi' ye !'' exclaimed Keziah, who lapsed into the vernacular when she was angry. ''Oot wi' ye !

If ye will have it a post-office, ye just collect me the next letters, d'ye hear?''

''Ou ay','' said Macfarlane. ''It is nae sae often they use it, ye ken; it's just for makin' appointments, I'm thinkin'. Burbeck, the carrier, said he seen Lizzie wi' Maister Tom at Wulstan day she was supposed to be gaein' to see auld Granny Dene at Wichenford.''

''And ye've been letting this gae on wi'out a word to me?''

''I thocht ye might ha'e kenned a' aboot it; ye maistly ken everything.''

''I just ken ye for a fule, Mac, that's what I ken,'' said Keziah, very angry now. ''Bring me a report every day; and watch that——''

''Coopid's Post-Office,'' said Macfarlane, with a stolid look at his sister. ''Ou ay'.''

''D'ye mark me?''

''Ou ay' !''

''And ye'll bring me every letter ye find?''

''D'ye think it's richt to rob the Post-Office—I mean the alder tree? Seems to me like forbidden fruit; but——''

''Ssssh !'' said Keziah, raising a finger. ''Here's my lady. The minute you're away speed up to the Homestead and bring me the bauble thing ye tell of.''

''But——''

''Nae buts; I've a purpose with it. I'll have a word wi' Master Tom Hussingtree.''

She little dreamt that it had almost been ''a word and a blow'' with some one else in that quarter.

CHAPTER VI.

DAVID MACFARLANE IS CROSS-EXAMINED BY LADY BERWICK.

LADY BERWICK was one of those women in regard to whom men, quoting themselves to be "as young as they feel," add, with emphasis, "and a woman as old as she looks." The Lady of Powyke, as they delighted to call her in the village of Comberton-cum-Besford, was, in appearance if not by years, entitled to be considered an eminently marriageable lady. Though she had been twice widowed, she was all the more worthy of a high place in the marriage market, in consideration of the fact that her widowhood had on each occasion been consoled with a handsome fortune in lands and tenements and in what are called gilt-edged securities.

Slightly above the medium height, she carried herself with a certain grace of manner that was evidently natural to her, as indeed it is only fair to say was her complexion. She also wore her own hair, which was abundant and of a rich brown. It was dressed high upon her head, and was in striking contrast with the pearl-grey tone of her morning dress.

The general impression conveyed in the expression of her face was that of a woman of social tact and energy. Beautiful as a girl, she was handsome in the autumn of her days. Her step was firm, her manner graceful and alert. Her hair was her own ; it was rich and abundant ; her red lips were slightly parted, but

with the capacity to shut down upon any scheme which her active brain might evolve and her judgment approve. Her teeth were white and not so regular as to suggest the dentist.

In short, Lady Berwick was a handsome, lively, clever woman, who might have been thirty-five, but as a matter of fact was forty-five, with the energy and the ambition of her early youth even before she married her first husband, which was one of the follies of her girlhood, as she would explain to her friends whenever the subject of marriage cropped up, and when she knew that her plurality of husbands had, behind her back, been a subject of discussion.

When she was more than usually daring, she would discourse upon the fame and fortunes of a certain countess, who had married four times and had been wooed by her fourth lover with as much fervour as that which had won her maiden heart. Like Lady Berwick, too, this countess had only one daughter ; but Lady Berwick rarely mentioned the fact that she and her own child had not got along well together, that Clarice preferred to live with her aunt on the Continent and hated England. It may be as well that the reader should at once understand that Clarice has no further part in this narrative than this mere mention of her existence. Lady Berwick lived her own life in her own way irrespective of any consideration for Clarice, who was amply provided for by her mother's second husband. She had always been averse to her mother's views of life and its obligations ; and indeed, according to Lady Berwick, was "quite a prude, my dear ; might have been a nun if she had had sufficient self-denial, a quality she does not possess any more, my dear, than her poor father, who had such a dread of dying that he hastened

his end by the very precautions he took to prolong his life."

And this was the lady who sailed into her handsome wide-spreading drawing-room, on this April day of our history, to see David Macfarlane, whose presence she professed not to observe.

Her ladyship's drawing-room was not the conventional salon. It was parqueted, be-rugged, Chippendaled, and adorned with delightful water-colour drawings ; but it proclaimed itself a serviceable apartment, not furnished for mere show ; a room to work and to live in, to lounge in and be lazy in also, if it so pleased its mistress and her guests ; but Lady Berwick was a busy woman, and there were a couple of escritoires in the drawing-room, with every appliance for epistolary work. They were both eminently artistic as cabinets of inlaid woods, and when open gave opportunities for a dainty show of stationery and works of reference, such as Court guides, peerages, dictionaries, lists of charities, and other volumes necessary to the work and play of a lady of fashion, who neutralised the frivolities of balls and receptions by philanthropic efforts to ameliorate the distress of the poor and advance the social and industrial interests of her country.

Whether Lady Berwick was quite sincere in her charitable work or not, she spared no pains to make it effective. Besides giving her personal attention to London schemes of charity when she was in town, she visited the sick at Comberton during her residence at Powyke House, attended the local Dorcas meetings, held stalls at the local bazaars, put in an appearance at the Missionary meetings, and in her own little chapelry of Powyke knew every man and woman and child, rich or poor. There was no poverty in the chapelry of

Powyke, because her ladyship played the part of God's Providence to the whole district. And yet she devoted herself to an intrigue against the happiness of Susannah Woodcote, who was the ward of her dearest friend, the Vicar of Comberton-cum-Besford, with the worst artifices of a diplomat and the malice of a rival in love whose rivalry had been challenged by a coquette, in which she had not the excuse of Susannah's consciousness of competition nor the challenge of an opponent; for the Vicar's ward was her friend, and a young lady of the most sweet and unsophisticated character; but as to this, the reader will exercise his own judgment when the facts of the widow's plot against Miss Woodcote are in evidence.

Lady Berwick laid aside an embroidered Cashmere cape as she sat down to her escritoire in the bay window that looked across a level lawn, bordered with daffodils, crocuses, and white narcissi, over the Breedon valley that presently became almost a mountain slope, creeping gradually upwards in an undergrowth of nut-bushes, brambles, and bracken to a sky-line fringe of beech and fir.

"Ah, Macfarlane," she said, with acted surprise; "what has brought you here?"

She spoke in a pleasant voice, but with the faintest suspicion of affectation, and a certain elocutionary distinction, the result of education rather than a gift of nature. It was a voice and manner that could be both imperious and commanding, and at the same time it could purr, as we shall see, purr and be soft, as it no doubt had been in the days when she was wooed and won by the two gentlemen who had succumbed to her various charms. But let it be understood at once that it had never been hinted, even by her severest critics,

that her married life had been otherwise than pleasant to her several consorts. She had been the life and soul of the Society into which her husbands had introduced her, and was invariably a woman of a pleasant and lively temper. To be otherwise was to grow sour and ill-favoured, she often told her maid ; which was argument enough to be cheerful and generous, if no other were available. Truth to tell, my lady was naturally of a sanguine and optimistic temperament ; but, as we shall see, a schemer nevertheless ; an *intrigante*, and subtle in her dissimulation.

"Keziah said ye wanted to see me," said Macfarlane, rising from his seat, "or I wouldna' ha'e ta'en the leeberty—espeecially in yer ladyship's best parlour."

"Said I wanted to see you?" commented her ladyship, looking around for Keziah, who had quietly left the room.

"Aye, yer ladyship," replied Macfarlane, with a defiant twirl of his cap, which he had picked up from the floor.

"Oh, yes, I remember," she said, with a smile. "I have a little present for your step-daughter, Lizzie. She looked so very becoming in church on Sunday, and they tell me she is more than useful in my Powyke schools."

"She's fond of the schule," said Mac.

"I hope she is not fond of that hulking fellow, Luke Fenton, who takes the liberty of doating on her, I am told,—at a distance."

"So they say, my lady.

"Well, let it be at a distance, such a sordid, money-grubbing, independent rogue!"

"Nay, yer ladyship, Luke's honest as the day, but he is a bit thrifty, small blame to him, and he's nae

mair chance wi' Lizzie than auld Noddlehead the softie o' Comberton."

"Very well, that's all right. It's so good of Lizzie to walk over to Powyke on Sunday afternoons and evenings, too, I hear, to help the little ones to read and write ; so very good of her."

"Me and Lizzie dinna' get along too well, but she's kind at heart, if she's wilfu', and I take it on mysel' to thank ye for yer good opinion."

"Not at all, Macfarlane," her ladyship replied. "Be seated, Macfarlane ; take this chair."

She pointed to an easy chair near her own, which Macfarlane sat upon without filling it.

"And how is your wife, Macfarlane?" asked her ladyship, in the friendliest way.

"She isna' exactly hersel' the day ; she's sair troubled with lumbago."

"Dear me ! I'm sorry."

"It's an awfu' complaint whateffer."

"Warmth is the best thing for lumbago, Macfarlane ; let her iron it."

"Iron her back, my leddy !" commented Macfarlane, an amused smile lighting up his sombre features. "Eh, I would nae dare to say sic a thing till her ; she'd be ironing me, and she's a braw airm for hurling twa pund o' iron at a mon !"

"Very well, Macfarlane," said her ladyship, with a laugh that gave him increased confidence in talking with her, "since prescribing for her is so dangerous, the secretary of our Matrons' Benevolent Society shall call upon her. The iron, she tells me, has already entered her soul, so 'twa pund' of it may not hurt her head."

"Eh, but ye're a humorous lady !" said Macfar-

lane, with a grin that puckered his small eyes in their deep settings.

"And how are they all at the Vicarage?" she asked, with a complete change of manner, sweeping aside Macfarlane's honest compliment. "Is Lord Cleeve still with you?"

"Aye, and to a' appearances he is nae inclined to gang hame."

"Where did he come from to the Vicarage? From London, or from his place at Charlton-Cleeve?"

"Nae, I dinna' ken; his valet brocht his luggage frae the Comberton station; but I think his lairdship rode in on his bicycle."

"I was not aware that he cycled," said her ladyship, "a man of his years."

"His years, my leddy! He wad nae care to hear yer ladyship talk about his years. He's ane o' the youngest men I know, except Maister Tom."

"Old enough to be Master Tom's father, I should say."

"I should hardly o' thocht it, but yer ladyship knows best."

"How long has he been visiting at the Vicarage? Must be nearly a month?"

"Mair than a month, yer ladyship; off and on at least five weeks."

"Must have arrived the day after I left for town?"

"Nae doot," said Mac.

"Quite five weeks, as you say, I went up for the First Drawing-Room," said her ladyship more by way of communing with herself than in response to Mac's calculation.

"I shouldna' wonder," he said.

"He must be very fond of the Vicar?"

"Maist folk are fond o' the Veecar," said Mac, who began to feel himself on the defensive, without comprehending what the fight was about.

"You have every reason to be fond of him."

"Ou ay' ; and the Veecar has no reason to ha'e any ither feelin' towards me," said Macfarlane, bridling inwardly at her ladyship's manner, which seemed to suggest that he was a dependent who gave nothing in return for his bread and his wage.

"I am sure he has not ; and as you say, Lord Cleeve is an old friend of the Vicar's."

"I did nae say he was, yer ladyship, but he is, a' the same ; and the freendship's as much on one side as the other."

Lady Berwick was not as adroit as she had intended to be in getting at Macfarlane's knowledge of the situation at the Vicarage, and it angered her ; which at once exposed her inquisitorial object in an interview which had puzzled Macfarlane the more when he found it had no reference to Lizzie and Master Tom.

"I suppose Lord Cleeve doesn't care for the Vicar's pretty ward?" she asked at last, in desperation disguised with a smile that put Macfarlane at his ease, since he felt that he had for the present done with "Coopid's Post-Office" and the possible scandal that might arise out of its secret correspondence.

"Are ye referring to Miss Woodcote?" asked Macfarlane, to gain time for thought.

"Yes—Miss Woodcote," her ladyship replied, a little impatiently.

"I shouldna' wonder if he does," said Macfarlane, who felt that the information would not please her ladyship and resented her manner towards him, though it had been pleasant enough for five minutes. "There's

naebody that doesna' approve o' Miss Woodcote, and his lairdship is nae likely to be an exception."

"Are they together much?"

"Maist a'ways," Macfarlane replied. "His lairdship doesna' seem to ha'e any pairticular relish for his ain company."

"Indeed," said her ladyship. "When you left them to come here, for instance?"

"Weel, aboot half an hour before I left, Veecar and Miss Woodcote stairted off to drive here and ca' on yer ladyship; they hadna' tel't my laird; but the minit he heerd, he had his horse oot and went gallopin' after them as if he'd been entered for a hurdle race, for he just took shortest cut across Veecarage meadows and doon the road paist the fairm."

Lady Berwick did not evidently consider it necessary to put on her best diplomatic manner with Macfarlane, or she unconsciously allowed her annoyance and disappointment to get the better of her self-control.

"Very well, Macfarlane," she said, rising and speaking with a haughtiness of manner that brought Macfarlane suddenly upstanding. "Tell your niece that I shall send her something."

"Yes, my lady, thank ye, my lady."

"And I hope the lumbago will soon be better," she continued, as she turned her back upon Macfarlane and busied herself with the papers on her desk.

"Yer ladyship's verra gude, thank ye."

"Is there anything else you wish to say to me before you go?"

"Nae," said Macfarlane, drawing himself up protestingly, "I didna' desire to say anything to yer ladyship—it was just Keziah that said ye'd like to see me."

"Yes, yes," her ladyship answered, and Keziah en-

tering the room opportunely, she turned to her and said, "Keziah, give your brother the little present I bought for your niece."

Keziah had the parcel in her hand.

"Here it is, David," she said.

"Nae, ye'd better tak' it to her yersel'," said Macfarlane, with offended pride.

"Take it," said Keziah, in a whisper; "take it."

She thrust the parcel into Macfarlane's unwilling hands.

"Good-morning, Macfarlane," said her ladyship, without looking up from her desk.

"Gude day, my lady," said Macfarlane, making for the door, and remarking, as he left the room, "I wish I had nae come."

CHAPTER VII.

THE WIDOW'S PLOT.

"IT'S as I suspected, Keziah," exclaimed her ladyship the moment Macfarlane had left the room; "Miss Woodcote is laying snares for Lord Cleeve."

"She'd never dare to do it," Keziah replied; "she's too modest and inexperienced."

"Ah," said her ladyship, with a sarcastic curl of the lip, "your modest and inexperienced young lady is often more daring than the widow who knows the world. She can say a risky thing with an air of innocence that has a special charm for some men; and the sweet young *ingénue* knows it."

"But Lord Cleeve would never be caught by a mere gel, though some men are foolish about good looks."

"Do you think Susannah pretty?"

"Just a leetle, but not the sort of beauty for a countess; that's for such as ye, Ma'm. Why don't ye take him in hand and marry him?"

"That's easily said."

"And easily done, if ye like, Ma'm; ye said it when ye married yer first."

"I did; that's true."

"Ye said it when ye married yer second."

"I did."

"Then say it again, and marry yer third."

"There would be no impropriety in taking a third husband," said her ladyship, reflectively.

"Impropriety!" repeated Keziah, scornfully and with

a tone of reproach in her voice. "Ye've the example of the Countess of Carleton, who is still living, as happy a woman as one could wish to see with her fourth; and you that young when you married your first that it needna' count, nor the second for that matter."

"You were with me when I was first married, Keziah."

"And I'll be with ye, I hope, when ye marry Lord Cleeve and wear a coronet, dear Mistress."

"You think that possible, with such a rival as Susannah Woodcote?"

"If I betted, like that reprobate the Vicar's son, I'd lay odds on ye, my lady. I'd begin this very season with an invitation to one of your receptions at Grosvenor Square, and I'd make his lordship fix the day when he could come, so that there would just be no mistake."

"But he has been to Grosvenor Square."

"Once, just to a formal dinner. I should book him this very day for dinner, and a reception later, next month; he's sure to be in town. I heard your ladyship say he ought to be in town now, attending to his duties in the House of Lords."

"You are always so thoughtful, Keziah, and with your eye constantly on the future."

"I've been maid to you, Ma'm, so long, and know your capabilities as well as if I could hear you think."

"I often wondered you never married, Keziah."

"Nae, I have no gift of wedlock; it's not for every woman. Eh, but I'd like to see ye in a toilet made for what you call conquest and with all your diamonds on, receiving Lord Cleeve at one of your grandest

functions, as the *Morning Post* calls the parties at Grosvenor Square."

It occurred to Lady Berwick, as she listened to her maid, that if Keziah had been taught elocution, dropped all her Scotch accent, and made the best of herself, she would have been quite presentable in good society; none the less so for a certain quaintness and individuality that often distinguish cleverness, and always, she thought, accompany genius.

"You like to see me in all my war paint, as Tom Hussingtree, that reprobate you mentioned just now, calls it; don't you think I look very well as I am?"

Asking the question, her ladyship surveyed herself in the circular mirror that had bewildered Macfarlane, and which now exhibited her ladyship at full length but in miniature.

"You always look just fine in morning dress, Ma'm."

"Lawrence liked me in a morning dress. Let me see—was it Lawrence who proposed to me after breakfast, in a morning wrapper of figured cashmere? Yes, it was Lawrence; I remember it well; it was made in Paris, by Madame Esse."

"I recall it, my lady; the gown with the drooping sleeves."

"Yes," said her ladyship, stepping a few feet back from the mirror. "If I were a man, Keziah, I am just the kind of woman I should fall in love with."

She made this comment on the picture in the mirror with a *naïveté* worthy of eighteen and the sincerity of conviction.

"I thought I never looked better since I was a girl, when I came down this morning," she continued.

"If you made up your mind to be Countess of Cleeve, there's nae obstacle in your way."

"Ah, but there is," said her ladyship, with a sigh, as she sat down by the window and gazed out upon the bright Spring landscape.

"An obstacle!" said Keziah. "What? Where?"

"That sly little ward of the Vicar's."

"Call her an obstacle?" exclaimed Keziah, scornfully. "I just call her a young thing."

"But youth has its own unrivalled attractions, Keziah; it is no good denying that—and after all, Keziah, I am very much of a widow."

"Just enough of a widow, my dear lady, to twist any man round your little finger, if you so desired; just enough of a widow to give ye the fascination that young things never ken. The art of love comes with practice."

"I'm afraid you are a designing, wicked spinster, Keziah. Is it Ovid you have been reading?"

"That's him," said Keziah, "the book with the clasp and the morocco binding. I never realised that love was such a recognised art before, but——"

"There's a carriage in the drive, Keziah," said Lady Berwick, interrupting her maid's literary reminiscences. "I can see it, beyond the Ten Acre Meadow; it may be the Vicar; look out and see. If it is, Miss Woodcote will be with him—perhaps Lord Cleeve also, since your brother says 'they're maist a'ways together.'" And she mimicked Macfarlane with vicious point.

"Susannah is an obstacle," she said to herself when Keziah had left the room and she listened for the wheels of the Vicar's carriage. "The little minx! There is only one way,—we must marry her to Tom. A far better match for her than Lord Cleeve, Both young and without experience—all the pleasant world before

them ; whereas I am both experienced and ambitious, know what are the rights of a peeress, and can never forget that before I married Berwick I had nearly won my lord ; yes, I feel sure of it. He was only the Honourable Fred Leggett then, with two lives between him and the peerage ; and Berwick was a knight and a millionaire. Fate gives me another chance—I must not fly in the face of Providence. No, my dear Miss Woodcote, my sweet and simple Susannah, you must marry Tom Hussingtree. . . . The first thing is to get them engaged. I think she likes Tom. I must tell her that he has not proposed from high motives, knowing that she has money and he has none. . . . Tom hates the restraint of the Vicarage, and is hard up,—he is always hard up,—one of those young rips whose allowances, whatever they may be, fall short of their wants. . . . Yes, it is a shrewd plan of campaign, I think. I'll play it like a game of chess,—and now for the first move,—we'll call it the Queen's gambit.''

CHAPTER VIII.

GIFTS AND COMPLIMENTS.

"YES, it is the Vicar, Ma'm. I can see his auld coachman's red nose," said Keziah, closing the door as she re-entered the room, fully prepared for some special command contingent thereon.

"You don't like the Vicar's coachman," said her ladyship, smiling.

"He's sae smug," said Keziah, alert and at my lady's elbow.

"Be quick; put these fashion-plates away."

She pushed into Keziah's hands a pile of coloured plates and cuttings from the popular ladies' papers of the day, which promptly disappeared in a convenient drawer.

"And stuff the *Sporting Life* and *The Tipster* under the window-seat."

Keziah obeyed, with a satisfied grin; she loved mystery and intrigue.

"Here's the *Guardian;* lay it on the table, with the *Athenæum*, the *Quarterly Review*, and the *Lady's Realm.*"

Keziah artfully displayed these current publications, and with a deftness worthy of the highest diplomacy placed a paper-knife between the leaves of the *Quarterly.*

"And give me the Vicar's last volume of sermons," said her ladyship, composing herself among the cushions of a couch consecrated to contemplation.

"D'ye ever read the Vicar's sermons, my lady?" asked Keziah, as she placed the darkly bound volume with its ecclesiastically decorated book-marker in her ladyship's hands.

"Why, yes, you know I do, almost every night with my glass of negus. Some ladies take a cigarette; I prefer a sermon; I sleep better."

Keziah smiled upon her mistress approvingly, and a servant, knocking at the door and opening it, announced the Vicar of Comberton-cum-Besford and Miss Woodcote.

"Ah, my dear Vicar, how do you do?" exclaimed Lady Berwick, in her blandest accents; "but where is our dear Susannah?"

"Here I am," said a sweet voice, "I was speaking for a moment to Keziah;" and there emerged from the shadow of the Vicar's portly form a pretty and distinguished girl of some eighteen summers, in what the slang of the time would denominate a "smart" walking costume of almond cloth (the coat braided with gold), a sable collar and muff, and a hat that lifted the well-poised head of the wearer and gave dignity to the youthful figure.

By portly, as applied to the figure of the Vicar, the narrator does not intend to suggest a smug, well-fed ecclesiastic, but a man of full height, well balanced on his feet, with a certain dignity of manner, and fulness more in the region of the chest than that part of the body which one signalises with the term aldermanic. He was a fine manly-looking clergyman, but with a gentle and courtly manner, a clean shaven intellectual face, grey hair that straggled somewhat about his ample brows, and a rich musical voice. For a scholar and a man who had distinguished himself at Oxford, he was

singularly unsophisticated, did not believe in the phenomenon of the New Woman, regarded it as mere journalistic cynicism, preferred the sewing-machine to the bicycle and the needle to the sewing-machine, admired what he called the frills and furbelows of woman's dress, abhorred the idea of cigarettes in the drawing-room ; and Lady Berwick, who always indulged in the daintiest Turkey weed before retiring, with or without her negus and with or without the soporific sermon she boasted of, never ventured to run counter to the Vicar's prejudices if she could possibly avoid it.

"Parson Hussingtree" as the villagers called him, "the Vicar of Comberton-cum-Besford" as they knew him in the capital city of the county—the faithful Wulstan, of historic memory—was a typical Churchman of the old school tempered by the educational progress of the day, but with all the instincts of the traditional Vicar who considered himself the father of his flock and his conduct the standard of morals.

At the same time he did not set himself up as worthy of saintship. He was not a severe disciplinarian ; was tolerant, generous, and human to a fault, but a hater of hypocrisy, and he resented cant just as much as if he were not in orders. He admired Lady Berwick. She took pains to compel his respect. She knew how to be an acceptable visitor among serious people, and how to enjoy the lighter society that she permitted herself in London. She was eminently a woman of the world, a diplomat in petticoats, a widow of experience ; not what you would call a bad woman, and yet not what you would call a good one.

If all is fair in love and war, the widow's plot against Susannah Woodcote might be condoned on the principle—or want of principle—of that much-abused prov-

erb ; but it was a war with love, a conspiracy against the grand passion, that in the opinion of an ethical jury of men and women would hardly be considered a holy campaign.

"I am so glad to see you, Susannah—I wonder if I dare call you Sue?" said the widow, laying aside her volume where the Vicar might by chance see it.

"I think you might," said the Vicar, answering for his ward ; "and permit me to say that we are very glad to see you ; it seems an age since you called at the Vicarage. We came to Powyke House to-day more particularly to thank you for the grapes you sent us—very early for grapes ; I fear you have made my gardener jealous, if the poor fellow can harbour a thought of you that is not respectful."

"Meaning Mr. Macfarlane?" said her ladyship, smiling. "I have been prescribing for his wife ; 'lumbago's an awfu' complaint whateffer'."

It was a good imitation, and they all laughed heartily. Lady Berwick knew just how far she could go with the Vicar, and he himself, at the Literary Society of the village, had on many occasions given the community readings from the poets and from Scott's novels, in which he had done more than suggest the characterisation of the leading figures in his representations of the various authors, whose works he had done much to popularise in Comberton.

"And while we thank you for the grapes, we return your basket," said Miss Woodcote, presenting her ladyship with a bouquet of white lilac from the Vicarage conservatory, that already announced itself in a rush of perfume that filled the sunny atmosphere of the room.

"What lovely flowers!" exclaimed her ladyship.

"Beautiful as the bearer. I don't know which to kiss first."

"I am the oldest," said Susannah, with a pretty curtsey intended to be in keeping with Lady Berwick's somewhat florid welcome.

"Yes, for the day only," said the widow, kissing the fair flushed face of the maiden. "And now forgive me for one moment—I must finish a most important note I was just writing, when I laid down my book and you came in. I know you will excuse me, Mr. Hussingtree. Keziah, give the Vicar the *Guardian* and the latest *Quarterly;* and Susannah dear, here are *The Century* and the *Lady's Realm*, they will amuse you, —and, Keziah, give Miss Woodcote the newest poet, you will find it on the little shelf yonder, with Browning and the handsome American edition of Herrick."

"Nay, don't let us interrupt you," the Vicar replied, as the widow sat down to her desk. "You are always so busy. I wish I had more ladies like you in the parish."

He looked at his ward rather than to the widow for an answer.

"Yes, indeed," said Susannah, as she took the books and magazines from Keziah; and the Vicar turned over the pages of the *Quarterly*.

"One moment, Keziah," said the widow, as she folded and directed a note which she had hurriedly written, and which she was not going to write before the Vicar and Susannah entered the room. It was a mysteriously worded billet-doux, familiar and affectionate. She knew that Tom was sensitive as her debtor. It had occurred to her that he might for a moment regard a missive from her as a creditor's letter, so she sweetened it with a tender flourish.

Keziah, in her silent manner, quiet but quick, went up to the desk and leaned over her mistress to take her whispered instructions.

"Have this note sent to Mr. Tom Hussingtree at once; he was trying a horse down in the Comberton Road half an hour ago, is probably at the White Hart by this time; wherever he is, have him found; I want him immediately."

"Yes, Ma'm," said Keziah, leaving the room and closing the door without a sound.

"I think that's a clever move," said her ladyship just as silently, "it opens the game boldly;" and then aloud, and rising from her seat, she said, "I wanted to ask your advice about my schools at Besfordwick; your son Tom—ah, what a fine fellow he is!—has undertaken to superintend the erection of a gymnasium for me."

"I fear gymnastics are too much in Tom's line," the Vicar replied, laying down the *Quarterly* and tucking his gold-rimmed glasses into his clerically cut waistcoat; "all the triumphs he obtained at Oxford were in the cricket field or on the river. But I must not trouble you with a father's criticisms; fathers and sons invariably expect too much of each other. I think we must say good-morning now."

"I am rather *triste* to-day," the widow replied, with an effective little sigh. "Will you not let Susannah—I must call her Sue—stay a little with me? I will drive her home by and by; I have some calls to make in the village."

"Oh, yes, by all means. And you shall not drive her home; I have a few parochial duties that will occupy me an hour or so, and I will come back for Susannah, and that will be another excuse to call and say good-morning again."

"That's very kind of you," said the widow. "I dare say Miss Woodcote and I may also find something to do in the interest of Comberton."

"I am sure you will," the Vicar replied; "you are always scheming—for the good of others—not only for Comberton, but for Wulstan too, as I invariably tell your detractors."

The word scheming grated for a moment on the widow's sensibility; but only for a moment, and she said, with a smile that had a dash of well-acted pathos in its expression, "Oh, yes, I have detractors; but we cannot all be beloved as you are. I know some of the good people of Wulstan don't understand me. I believe they think I am positively wicked because I entertain in what is considered a rather liberal, some say a mixed, way at Grosvenor Square during the season."

"I wonder the Chairwoman of the Matrons' Society condescends to sit down with you," remarked Susannah, with a cheerful little laugh.

"Nay, Susannah, my dear; Mrs. Errington is quite a broad-minded woman, I assure you."

"Is she?" said Susannah. "I have heard her say that a theatre is the portal of the bottomless pit; that was after we went to the charity performance at Wulstan, you know, about which Mr. Zebedee Lipstock made a sermon on you, my dear guardian."

"Ah, well, it is all in the way of his business," said the Vicar; "we must not mind trifles of that kind."

"I dare say Mrs. Errington gets over her disapproval of me by praying for my dear little Sue."

"There are many in Comberton, and in Wulstan, too, who have good reason to pray for you, Lady Berwick; even the Matrons' Society is deeply indebted to you for its power of benevolent usefulness—money may

be the root of all evil, but it is also a very healthy root for good ;—good-bye, for the present.''

Lady Berwick rung the bell, and a footman, in a livery almost as sober as the badge of easy servitude at the Vicarage, opened the door for his reverence, who drove away in his landau, full of kindly thoughts about his wealthy parishioner.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WIDOW AND THE MAIDEN.

"TAKE off your hat, dear—would you like to go to my room?"

"No, thank you," said Susannah, removing her pretty head-gear with a simplicity that was in striking contrast with her fashionable attire.

"My love, your costume is a perfect dream," said the widow. "May I ask the name of the artist—French, of course?"

"I dare say," Susannah replied, with a smile. "I think the Wulstan firm have a lady who is continually going to and from Paris. I fear what taste there may be in this costume is theirs. I really don't take much trouble about my dress; I find if I keep a little in arrear of the newest fashions I get along very well."

"You are quite an oddity, Susannah; you never look your name."

"Don't I? How do you mean, Lady Berwick?"

"One thinks of a Susannah in a Quaker-like mode—I don't know why—and you look more like a pretty Kate or a seductive Alice; yet I would not have you called anything else. I remember not long since when we were talking of Christian names, the last time Tom Hussingtree dined here, he said he thought Susannah the most beautiful in all the calendar."

"Really! I had no idea that Tom would care to discuss such trifles."

"Oh, but Tom is not the mere sporting young

fellow people think ; he is quite a sentimentalist, in his way.''

The widow drew Susannah towards her, and they sat together by the embers of a wood-fire that was burning in a quaint basket-like grate. The two brass dogs at the base of it were golden and bronzed in the glow of the cinders. It was a warm and sunny day, but Powyke House rarely let out its fires until the summer had fairly come to the valley and the distant hills.

''And it is companionable,'' said Lady Berwick, in reply to some remark of Susannah's. ''I am lonely sometimes, and I see pictures in the fire and hear music in the burning logs.''

''Yes?'' said Susannah, looking into the white and red ash which the sun almost snuffed out. ''I should hardly have thought you had time for such fancies.''

''Nobody quite understands me, Sue, dear. Because I am cheerful and give myself a deal of unnecessary work, people think I have no heart, no sentiment, no illusions.''

''Oh, that is not what I was thinking,'' said Susannah. ''We all know what a kind heart you have.''

''My dear, a widow has shadows in her life, if she loved her husband, that none but herself can feel or realise ; of course, that goes without saying, and I doated on my poor dear Sir Leicester Berwick ; he was a charming companion. But there, I did not ask you to stay that I might make you miserable. Come, tell me all the news—when does Lord Cleeve go to London?'

''I don't know,'' said Susannah.

''He ought to be attending to his political duties.''

''He does not care much about politics. He confessed to the Vicar the other night that he is sorry he

was raised to the peerage ; he could have been much more useful to the country, he says, continuing the work he was engaged in.''

''What, as Chairman of Quarter Sessions, member of the County Council, President of the County Hospital, and general county factotum?''

''Yes, I suppose so, besides assisting the Librarian at Wulstan, and writing up the history of the county, and all that kind of thing.''

''Not the highest ambition, eh? Do you think so?''

''He says politics is a mere game of ins and outs.''

''Lord bless us ! and he is tired of being with the Outs. It is always members of the Opposition, my dear, who hate politics.''

''Is it? I did not know. The Vicar says he ought to be satisfied ; it is not as if he had to fight for his seat.''

''No, he is an hereditary legislator. Perhaps it would be better if peers who don't care to act might resign, like trustees to a will.''

''Yes,'' said Susannah, not quite following the widow's comparison.

''A mere game ! I dare say he is right, and not half so interesting as a game of chess—played as I sometimes play it, with real figures.'' She had nearly said, ''with real men,'' and for the moment was slightly confused, and hurriedly added, ''And what is Lord Cleeve's favourite study just now? I don't mean in the way of sport, nor the potentialities of the wheeler or the motor car, or anything so frivolous as golf, but in literature and art?''

''Oh, do you think him so very serious?'' asked Susannah.

"If he is not serious now, when is a man of his age to be serious?"

"I never thought of him in that light."

"But he is grey, and already stoops a little in the shoulders."

"I've only seen him stoop when he is riding on his bicycle."

"I can never understand a man who loves horses riding on such a wretched invention as a bicycle."

"I used to dislike it very much," said Susannah, "but I begin to think I may one of these days become quite an enthusiastic wheeler, like the curate's wife."

"The curate's wife, my love! If I ever had the slightest idea of sticking myself up on a wheel, the fact that the curate's wife goes careering about the country like a stork on a grindstone would make the thing impossible."

"Lord Cleeve says everybody begins his wheeling experiences by villifying the machine."

"Is that how he began?"

"Yes, and it seemed very undignified at first to see him riding on the Vicarage lawn."

"On the Vicarage lawn?"

"He was showing me how easy it was; but I did not find it so."

"Did you try on his machine, a gentleman's machine? My dear Susannah, you shock me!"

"Of course I did not," replied Susannah, blushing.

"My darling, forgive me," said her ladyship, kissing the girl on both cheeks.

"Still, I fear you will be shocked when I tell you that I took my first lesson on a wheel the curate's wife lent me."

"Really? Well, you do surprise me; and did Lord Cleeve give you the lesson?"

"Yes, and yesterday I rode with his lordship quite five miles; the Vicar threatens to sell my mare, and to dismiss the groom."

"Well, well, they call me a Radical, but when a Tory Earl and the ward of the Vicar of Comberton go about the country on bicycles, Democracy is levelling upwards instead of downwards; but it is always the unexpected that happens, they say. Ah, well, let us get away from the vulgarities of modern locomotion and talk about books and the *belles-lettres;* Lord Cleeve has always some serious study in hand, some great literary project; what is his latest fancy in that direction?"

"He is collecting old ballads for a work he is writing on chivalry," said the maiden, her interest awakening in the conversation.

"What a beautiful subject! Has he read any of his work to you?"

"Yes; a great deal of it."

"Is it good?"

"I think it is beautiful."

"Do you recall any part of it in particular that is beautiful?"

"Yes; there is the story of a maiden who had plighted her troth to a brave knight. They brought reports that he was false, dishonoured; yet she still loved on, nothing could shake her faith."

The maiden looked into the fire as she spoke, and the widow watched her with the eyes of a lynx.

"Just as nothing would shake yours, my dear, if you gave your word, eh?"

"I hope I should be true; but such a situation

is never likely to occur, dear Lady Berwick," and the girl turned a smiling face to her hostess.

"Of course Lord Cleeve has had what they call his affairs, and men of the world take a delight in contemplating the ideals of their youth."

"But do you call Lord Cleeve a man of the world?" Susannah asked, turning once more to the fire, which by this time the sun had nearly burnt out. "He does not talk like one; he says there is nothing nobler in human nature than faith, nothing more beautiful in woman than to be true to her word."

"That is very beautiful," said the widow, taking the maiden's hand and fondling it; "the idea of a woman keeping her word, even if she had to make great sacrifices for the man to whom she plighted her troth. Should you through life act upon it?"

"I hope so," said Susannah. "I should try, if I were put to it."

"Dear little Sue!" said the widow. "Have you never led any youth to believe that you cared for him?"

"Don't ask romantic questions, dear," replied the maiden.

"Of course Lord Cleeve is old enough to be your father; they say, by the way, he is to marry Sir Bradford Rolletson's daughter—they are keeping it a secret at present—oh, he is a sly gentleman, my Lord Cleeve."

"Do you think so?"

"Indeed, I know it, my love. They say of a woman, fair, fat, and forty; of a man they might say fickle, false, and fifty, dear. Not that I have a word to say against Lord Cleeve; I like him immensely, admire him, think him awfully clever."

"We are very fond of him at the Vicarage," said Susannah, thoughtfully.

"When I asked you what you are pleased to call that romantic question, do you know of whom I was thinking?"

"No."

"Can't you guess?"

"I don't think I want to guess, Lady Berwick."

"Don't you, love? Shall I tell you? Yes, I will, if it is only out of kindness to him—it may be out of kindness to you, too, my love. Tom Hussingtree is desperately in love with you."

"Desperately in love with me! Oh, Lady Berwick, what makes you say so?" the maiden replied, and blushed.

"Why, all the young men in the county would be in love with you if they dared!"

"But, my dear Lady Berwick——"

"Nonsense, my love; your father expected you to marry, you know, and it is the duty as well as the pleasure of a girl's life. He left you an added fortune to the one you now enjoy on the day of your marriage—you know that, of course—surely the Vicar has told you?"

"The Vicar never talks to me of such things; but I know my poor dear father provided for such a contingency."

"Contingency, my dear—say blessing. Why, when I was your age I was the happiest little wife in the empire."

She was nothing of the kind, if the truth must be told, and it may as well be mentioned, in an aside, to the reader. Her first husband was a brute, though she led him a dance; and even Sir Leicester Berwick found

her ladyship a good deal of a trial, though he worshipped the ground she walked upon, as he often told her, and indeed was her lover and slave to the day of his death.

"All the young men in the county!" said Miss Woodcote, rather energetically. "I am very glad they dare not."

"Would it embarrass you?"

"It would make me very indignant."

"Would it really?"

"Indeed it would."

"How temperaments in girls differ! It would have delighted me at your age; it would not have embarrassed me nor made me indignant. Why, the cavaliers Lord Cleeve has been telling you about made their loves a toast, and even wagered on their constancy."

"You see, Lady Berwick, you were born in what you call the world, were you not? In London? That makes a difference, I dare say. I know no other house than the Vicarage, hardly any other city but Wulstan; have only stayed in town on three occasions, have never 'come out' as you call it, nor travelled on the Continent."

"My dear, you have been shamefully neglected."

"Don't say that, Lady Berwick. I am very happy."

"I wish Tom Hussingtree could say so."

"Why cannot he?"

"Because he loves you, and is afraid to say so. He is wearing his heart out."

"Afraid!"

"Yes, dear; afraid."

"I had no idea he was afraid of anything, certainly not of so insignificant a person as me. You should

have seen him take a bullfinch and the river yesterday ; it made the Vicar's heart stand still. Afraid ! Why, he rides a horse that even Dick the huntsman dare not mount."

"I have known a soldier who would ride up to an enemy's guns, and yet would flinch before such a pair of eyes as yours, Sue."

"They never made Tom flinch, I can assure you. But I wish he were a little more studious, for the dear Vicar's sake, don't you?"

"He would study and be all the Vicar could desire, if he were engaged to you, Susannah."

"Engaged to me ! I thought you said you were *triste* and dull. I think you are in one of your merry moods."

"Am I too merry? I am always moved by the sight of young hearts in their first flutters of love. Confess now, you like Tom?"

"Why of course I like him ; who does not? I believe I like him almost as much as our dear gardener Macfarlane likes him ; and he says he would lay down his life for him. But I don't like him in the way you mean."

"As you say," went on the widow with warmth, "who could help liking him? A handsome, breezy, generous young fellow, the pride of his college."

"I don't know about that."

"I mean in the best sense—first on the river, a superb horseman, always good-tempered, possesses all the fine qualities of a young English gentleman. If he were to speak out now, what would you say?"

"Don't you think it would be just as well to wait until he does?" said Susannah, with a spirited expression of manner that gave piquancy to the lovely face.

"I am sure the match would please the Vicar," said her ladyship.

"Do you think so?"

"I know it. Wouldn't it please you, eh? Confess now."

"I will confess when Tom asks me," said the maiden.

"Check!" said Lady Berwick to herself; but whether it was in her own favour or a move to the advantage of Susannah, at the moment might seem a matter of doubt. There was a certain defiant expression in Susannah's eyes that her ladyship may have misinterpreted, though Susannah's heightened beauty under the influence of newly aroused feelings gave her a shock of envy.

CHAPTER X.

KEZIAH'S WORD WITH TOM.

THE personality of Susannah Woodcote was singularly attractive ; it was a sweet and elevating presence ; trustful, innocent, but with a longing expression in the eyes that would have been pathetic but for the natural cheerfulness of her disposition.

From an intellectual point of view her face may have suffered in the estimation of the physiognomist on account of a certain roundness that was characteristic of her whole figure. She was fair, with a mantling colour that in moments of excitement spread beneath her eyes and enhanced their soulful expression. Her mouth was sensitive, with an occasional expression of something between laughter and tears. She was of medium height and carried herself with a natural gracefulness. Her head was poised with a certain dignity that was in harmony with her mind and did not militate from her generous and sympathetic nature. Reared, since a child, at a private school and the Vicarage, she had dwelt among people actuated by the finest moral and religious ethics but without any assumption of superior virtues and no taint of cant. She was the heiress of Spencer Woodcote, Esquire, of Woodcote-in-the-Valley, who had died in India when Susannah was only a child, her mother having preceded him only a few months ; so that Susannah had been accustomed to orphanage and had found a second father and mother in the Vicar and his wife, the latter,

alas, having died a few years prior to this present narrative.

It was almost on the words of Susannah, "I'll confess when Tom asks me," that young Hussingtree was announced by Keziah. He had come post-haste, in answer to Lady Berwick's invitation.

"And please, Ma'm, he says may he come in?"

"How strange!" exclaimed her ladyship, rising. "Just as we were talking of him; of course, he may come in."

"Forgive me," said Susannah, laying her hand upon her ladyship's ample sleeve, and detaining Keziah with a nod. "I will go now, if you please. Keziah will show me out by the garden; I can easily walk to the Vicarage."

"My dearest, you shall do nothing of the kind. But I'll tell you what you shalll do—you know I have to keep you until the Vicar returns—you shall go into the library until Tom leaves, or perhaps you may like to see him; anyhow, come and let me show you some new books that came down from London yesterday—the new poet and George Meredith's new novel—poor stuff, I think, but I am not intellectual, you know; I prefer Rhoda Broughton——"

While she was saying these things, she was leading Susannah into the library. Returning, she remarked as Keziah was showing in Mr. Tom Hussingtree, "I think that is not a bad move—we will call it the Queen's gambit."

Tom Hussingtree, having shaken the dust of the Homestead from his feet, with well acted nonchalance swung into the room in a free, lounging manner, smiling familiarly at Lady Berwick, who lifted a rebuking finger at him as she went to her desk before greeting

him. She was always so busy, you see; it was part of her ladyship's system to be busy, to have endless letters to answer and innumerable businesses of a social and benevolent character to get through every day.

"Your hand is feverish," she remarked, as she laid her own in his dry palm.

"It isn't late hours," he said, with a bland look of pleasant confession. "Really now, I've been awfully good of late. The truth is I rode over; my mare is fresh and wouldn't come by the road, preferred to take all the fences across the Vicarage meadows."

"Oh, that's all, is it? Feverish with the ride. Well, you would like a glass of bitter ale, I suppose?"

"I was just going to take the liberty of saying so."

"I knew it. Keziah, bring Mr. Hussingtree a jug of ale; he'll prefer it from your hands, don't ring for John."

When Keziah had left the room, Tom said, "It was very good of you to send for me—what is it?"

"Nonsense," said her ladyship. "I did not send for you. But there, don't talk to me just now; I am very busy for a moment. Look under the window-seat yonder, and you'll find the latest *Sporting Life*—amuse yourself with that."

"All right, Lady Berwick," said Tom, sitting down to study the sporting paper; while her ladyship, after making real or imaginary memoranda at her desk, left the room, and presently Keziah returned with a silver tray and a jug and glass. This attention was a condescension on her part, which she felt at the moment, but on other grounds than personal ones. There was nothing she would not do for her mistress, and she felt that making her footman, friend, and maid, all in one for the nonce, was done with some hidden purpose.

She knew Lady Berwick well enough to understand that she was in the midst of some scheme or other in which Keziah had her part and her work. At the same time she had resolved to let Mr. Tom Hussingtree know what she thought of him and his visits to her brother's cottage. Under a certain subservient manner, Keziah had plenty of fire and was not without courage.

"Thank you, Keziah," said Tom, as he drained the glass at a draught and refilled it. "Hot work, riding, this morning."

"A word with you," said Keziah, her face pale, her lips quivering.

"Yes, Keziah, by all means: what is it?"

"Stop your visits to the farm, and put no more of your tomfoolery into that alder tree."

"What farm, Keziah? What alder tree?" Tom asked, to gain time for thought, once more face to face with his villainy that seemed all at once to have begotten a sudden publicity.

"What farm? David Macfarlane's, otherwise the Vicar's; and what alder tree, ye ken very well."

"Does David object to my visits?"

"Nae, the more's the pity."

"Does Mrs. Macfarlane?"

"Mrs. Macfarlane's a frivolous body and daft."

It was on his lips to mention Luke Fenton, but discretion held back the question that trembled there.

"Does Lizzie Melford complain?" he asked, defiantly.

"Nae; but I do."

"I don't go to the farm to see you, Keziah."

"But if you gae to the farm again, on your auld bad errand, you will see me," said Keziah, white to the lips.

"Shall I?" said Tom, coolly flicking his boots with his whip. "Then I won't go, Keziah,—when you are likely to be there."

"And there's the bauble you gave her," said Keziah, taking a necklace from her bosom and flinging it at his feet. "Take it back, and gie it to some other poor fool."

"I will," said Tom, calmly picking it up and thrusting it into his coat-pocket.

"Ah, I dinna' doubt ye," said Keziah. "You're a fine thing to be the son of an honest and religious gentleman!" And she flung out of the room.

Tom, with a sudden change of manner, following her retreating form and contemplating the door that she swung to with a bang, exclaimed, "Ah, you catamaran! I'll be even with you one of these days. . . . Yes, and with you, Mr. Virtuous Fenton. What the devil was the matter with me? I would have backed myself to have smashed him in a single round, and I never got near him! Is he so very virtuous, I wonder? And Lizzie so very true?"

Having done the girl the foulest wrong, it was quite in keeping with such a nature as Tom's that he should jump at the first possible excuse for doubting her.

CHAPTER XI.

LADY BERWICK AND SUSANNAH.

"WELL, Mr. Tom, do you feel better after the athlete's favourite refreshment?"

"Thank you, yes," said Tom; "but I didn't know bitter ale belonged to that denomination of liquors."

"Oh, no, you are very innocent!" And truth to tell, Tom looked as mild-mannered a hero as one of Bret Harte's gentle six-foot swashbucklers. Indeed, Lady Berwick had been fairly impartial in her description of his personal appearance—a breezy, handsome, well-set-up young fellow. So strange are the eccentricities of physiognomical development, that any one would have been justified in giving him a highly moral character, judging him by his open countenance, his frank manner, his handsome mouth, his eyes wide apart, and his free and careless gait.

The only thing that could be said against this verdict was that his eyes were not quite steadfast. They were apt to wander when they should have been fixed upon the face of the person with whom he might be conversing; they shifted, were closer together than is happily usual, and had a certain show of self-consciousness that might have been due to nervousness.

But take him altogether, Tom Hussingtree was the sort of fellow you would look upon as the beau ideal of an Oxford student who did not study, the young Englishman who thought more of Dr. Grace than Mr. Gladstone, revered the memory of Archer the jockey

above that of Tennyson the Laureate, and to whom a spin across country was a greater delight than a spin through the finest poetry that ever was written, a freshly drawn tankard of bitter ale beyond all the wine that the rarest vineyard ever produced. . . . And how terribly mistaken you would have been, we know who have seen the Vicar's son studying for the Bar in town, or, as he himself cynically but not without a touch of remorse described it, matriculating for the dock.

Lady Berwick was quite aware that Tom was not a good young man. She did not like him any the worse on that account. She was not, herself, a good woman ; but she had no idea to what depths of degradation Tom was sinking or had sunk, and as yet she knew nothing of the affair at the Homestead.

With all his liberality, she knew that the Vicar was inclined to keep Tom rather short of the allowance that a lively young fellow with expensive tastes would require, and she felt a real pleasure in helping Tom out of his little financial difficulties. She called the sums she had lent him trifling amounts ; and so they were to her, but to Tom they were of vast importance ; and after his first plunge into the humiliating position of being her ladyship's debtor, he lost all sense of shame in the matter, and was quite willing to be her slave in that respect—or to be her lover, as Jim Renshaw had advised, but she had never given him the slightest reason to approach her on those terms.

Considering how she fancied herself as a rival beauty to even the youngest belle of a London season, it must be said for Lady Berwick that she had treated Tom with a kind of maternal solicitude that was very creditable to her, and this view had been strongly borne in upon the mind of the Vicar. "Young enough to

attract any honest man in search of a wife," he had said, "Lady Berwick has the modesty not to attempt to disguise the fact that, Tom being motherless, she is not too young to be his adviser, nor too old to be companionable with our dear Susannah."

Lord Cleeve had not responded with alacrity to this remark, so the Vicar had emphasized his opinion by repetition. Lady Berwick knew exactly how the Vicar would like to think of her, and she played her part accordingly; for his reverence was the acknowledged authority on conduct, moral, physical, and religious, in all the Powyke Valley, besides the wide parish of Comberton-cum-Besford; and even among county magnates he was a person of great consideration.

"Oh, by the way, where is Keziah?" said her ladyship, in that interrogative and busy mood that was so characteristic of her.

"Here I am," said Keziah, unusually alert and watchful when her mistress had any special business on hand.

"Excuse me one moment, Mr. Tom," said her ladyship, going to her desk at the other end of the room; Keziah following her, Tom once more burying his face in the sporting paper.

"Listen, Keziah," said her ladyship, in a low voice.

"Yes, Ma'm."

"Go to the garden-gate. Lord Cleeve must pass that way if he has followed the Vicar, as your brother David said—open the gate suddenly when you see him, as if you were going out. He is sure to speak to you. Tell him your mistress is at home—and that Miss Woodcote is with her."

"Yes?"

"Nothing more, Keziah."

"Very well, Ma'm," said Keziah, leaving the room.

And thereupon her ladyship proceeded to play her next move.

"Well," she said, "Mr. Reprobate, what is a good thing for the City and Suburban?"

The question was a great relief to Tom, for, though on her lips the phrase "Reprobate" was more or less one of compliment, just now it had for Tom himself a certain sting that penetrated the something that might be called his conscience; it was only the smallest kind of hurt, but he felt it for a second, like the prick of a pin.

"Why, Lady Berwick," he replied, with a smile, "Nimrod's the pick of the basket."

"Is basket a horsey term for a stable?"

"I mean he's the best of the string," said Tom, varying the metaphor, with a laugh.

"Then you may put me a little fiver on Nimrod, will you?"

"Will I? Delighted to have the honour; and I'll back your luck with a tenner myself."

"Don't speak so loud; Miss Woodcote is in the library. Just pop the *Sporting Life* under the cushion again. Nimrod is not the subject I want to talk about. I want you to think of appearances a little more in regard to Susannah."

"In what way, Lady Berwick?"

"Sit down, and I will tell you," her ladyship replied, indicating a chair by the seat into which she settled herself as if for a long chat.

"Thank you," said Tom, looking at her ladyship with all the steadiness he could command.

"Are you so blind that you don't see how madly Lord Cleeve is in love with your father's ward, and how she is getting to like his gentlemanly and considerate treatment of ladies, his high moral tone——"

"His high moral bunkum—excuse me," said Tom, interrupting her ladyship.

"No, Tom, it is not bunkum! His courteous manner is quite natural to him, just as your brusque manliness is natural to you. While he rises into a heaven of culture, you descend to the vulgar earth. He has trained his horse on Mount Olympus; yours has battened on Powyke Common."

"Never had any faith in Mount Olympus as a training ground," said Tom, dropping easily into the spirit of her ladyship's similes, "and I don't believe poor Archer ever had; that is, if he knew anything about Mount Olympus, and both I and Susannah like Powyke Common. But what do you want me to do?"

"Have you been riding lately with Miss Woodcote?"

"Not lately, no."

"She rides with Lord Cleeve instead of Tom Hussingtree now."

"Does she? Well, she's a good companion on the road or across country, I will say that for her, a light hand, a firm seat, and knows no fear. She's ridden since she was a child, and that's the way to make a horsewoman. But, as I said before, Lady Berwick, what do you want me to do?"

"Nothing but what is very easy," she replied, at the same time pointing, in what Tom thought a rather mysterious way, to the library door. "In that room is Susannah Woodcote, underneath the soft cushion is the *Sporting Life*, just now on its way from the cellar was a jug of bitter ale, and at the present moment in your pocket, I'll be bound, are a short pipe and a tobacco pouch."

"Well?" rejoined Tom, his face beaming with amused curiosity. "Well, Lady Berwick?"

"Well, a little less *Sporting Life*, a little less bitter ale, a little less tobacco, and a little more Susannah—that's what I mean. She's worth the sacrifice of the whole lot, for that matter, to a young fellow just starting life and with no settled prospects; one of the prettiest girls in the county and fifty thousand pounds to her fortune, as the old chroniclers would have put it."

"That's true, no doubt," said Tom; "but life without beer and tobacco?"

"Wouldn't be half as bad as all beer and no Susannah. Besides, you can educate a woman into beer and tobacco and backing the favourite, and even making a book, when she's your wife."

"I suppose you can," said Tom; "you ought to know."

"Did I, Master Impertinence? If I ought to know, then take my tip about Susannah, as you horsey men would say. You've seen the favourite beaten too often not to respect outsiders, especially when the dark one is of good pedigree. You are the favourite now; but Lord Cleeve is going up in the betting, and may yet—as your friend under the sofa cushion would put it—reach very short odds."

"You are a very jolly sort—excuse a bit of slang—but you see——"

"I ought to have apologised for my own slang; that's what you mean, I suppose. But what were you going to say?"

"That I never was more surprised in my life. I, Tom Hussingtree, the favourite! Why, I am not entered for the race. You are talking of some other engagement and some other fixture altogether."

"Not in the race! What do you mean? Why, didn't we discuss the possibilities of it long ago?"

"Yes, and it was off as soon as mentioned. The Vicar would not hear of it; and, besides, Susannah never cared for me, except as a friend, a kind of relation," said Tom, using the same argument that he had set up against the suggestion of Jim Renshaw—whose existence her ladyship seemed—fortunately, Tom thought—to have entirely forgotten, for she had never mentioned him since she had warned Tom to cut his acquaintance.

"Not entered!" exclaimed Lady Berwick, with well-acted astonishment. "Not in the running! What do you mean? Susannah thinks you are."

"Does she?"

"Why, of course she does. Do you imagine I should have taken all this trouble, if I did not know that?"

"You generally know what you are about, I must admit, Lady Berwick; but——"

"But you think there are exceptions to that rule, and this morning's business is an exception?"

"I think you have made a mistake."

"Then Miss Woodcote is to blame."

"How do you mean?"

"She has been talking of no one else but you this half-hour."

"Really!"

"I wonder your ears did not tingle; your conscience certainly ought to have pricked you for neglect of her."

"You astound me!"

"You have astonished her, poor child. It is not the woman's place to make advances."

"No; but she might have given a fellow a lead."

"She must have given you many a lead, as you call it, that you have been too dull to take or perceive. You ought to be very proud to have won the love of such a girl."

"Good heavens, Lady Berwick! You don't mean what you say?"

"I never was more in earnest. I'll go and fetch her. The rest I must leave to you!"

And without another word Lady Berwick disappeared, Tom rushing to open the door for her and being pleasantly repulsed.

"What a fool I have been!" he thought, as he paced the room, now pausing to look at a picture that he did not see, now going to the window without looking out. "I must indeed have been blind as well. A fool! An idiot! Fifty thousand pounds, and an additional twenty on the day of her marriage. But what will the Vicar say? Who cares, if she's willing! It comes upon me—like backing some outsider at a hundred to one, and seeing him, after a bad start, dropping to a hundred to nothing, creep up to the post and win in a canter. . . . Not a bad sort, either; rather prim, given to poetry, just a bit too religious, devilish pretty for that kind of girl! Even that blackguard Jim, who never saw her nor the Vicar, had more prescience than I, and a keener appreciation of my chances. It staggers me! The idea only entered my head once—that was two years ago—and I don't know that I've ever regretted that it was squelched right away. But seventy thousand pounds! By Jove, it is a lot of money! . . . There'll be trouble about Lizzie, of course. Every streak of good luck I have ever had has been wiped out by a stroke on the other side. Poor little Liz! But, confound her, what did she want to have that thief Luke Fenton hanging about for? What'll he do, I wonder? . . . What'll she do——?"

His thoughts were interrupted at this point by the entrance of Lady Berwick and Susannah.

CHAPTER XII.

"FAINT HEART NEVER WON FAIR LADY."

"NOTHING like jealousy to fix a young man's desires," said Lady Berwick, when she announced to Susannah that Tom was in the next room, and "raving against his own folly."

"What folly?" asked Susannah.

"The folly of waiting until the danger of losing you should arouse his love into a passion."

"My dear Lady Berwick, you must be mistaken," said Susannah, her heart in a flutter, she hardly knew why.

"No, it is you that are mistaken. Poor boy, with all his *sang-froid*, and his knowledge of the world, so much greater than your own, he has not dared to confess his secret to any one but me—poor me, who am evidently destined to be everybody's confidante. My dear Susannah, Tom loves you madly; the fire has smouldered these three years, to-day it is aflame."

Susannah had never before listened to such language as this, and Lady Berwick surprised her still further with a fervent kiss, as she went on to say, "It is not every marriage that is made in heaven, but some are, and in that case it is no matter what opposition may arise; but there, I am saying too much. Come into the next room, and try to appear wholly unconscious of all I have said."

Susannah suffered herself to be led into the drawing-room, in quite a sweet sisterly fashion, without under-

standing her frame of mind at the moment or attempting to think about it, so completely had Lady Berwick for the time being taken possession of her.

The widow paraded the maiden, full of the assurance of a winning game; paraded her before Tom as the owner of the competitor for the Gold Cup she had talked of might parade what he considered to be "a certainty."

All through her life she had rarely set her heart upon anything she had not achieved. Susannah out of the way, she felt as certain of Lord Cleeve as if he were already sitting at her feet. It is true she had not counted upon a factor in this present enterprise that she had not yet met in an opponent—namely, a fervent and heart-felt love. Lord Cleeve, however, hardly admitted to himself this feeling for the Vicar's ward, though for two years it had tinged every action of his life.

It had come to him one Autumn day in the Vicar's garden, Susannah walking by the side of the clergyman among the last roses of the year, their leaves making a carpet upon which the Vicar and his ward paced up and down, while he (Lord Cleeve) read to them his favourite passages from "In Memoriam."

As he read, the figure of the girl, her pathetic eyes, her soft footfall, her smile, had passed into his soul; a something to be worshipped, a figure for the niche of a poetic thought, to develop later into a love too deep for words, and a love he dared not breathe lest the charm of it should be shadowed by the disparity of their ages, which had come home to him at Powyke House as a blow such as the merchant feels when he is told his ships have gone down at sea and he is beggared.

And yet he conceived the idea that there was some

kind of binding link between him and Susannah that was a better and more beautiful thing than could possibly be forged by Lady Berwick in the interests of Tom and what she called "young hearts." He rode these thoughts at a gallop, to suddenly drop into a walk, and sought his room—the guest-chamber at the Vicarage—with feelings too deep for tears, even if he had not been too manly to weep.

"Ah, Susannah—so glad to see you," said Tom, in his breezy manner. "Would you believe it, Lady Berwick, though Miss Woodcote and I may be said to live in the same house, since I left Oxford I haven't had an opportunity of a chat with her—you'll hardly believe it!"

"Nonsense, Tom," said Susannah.

"I mean what you call a regular *tête-à-tête*, don't you know."

"Really!" said Lady Berwick; "then you shall have one now. I am going down to the gardener's cottage; I want him to cut some flowers for the Vicar. Will you keep house for me while I am gone? I shall only be a few minutes. Young people should be frank, and understand one another."

Then she kissed Susannah on both cheeks and with the alacrity of five-and-twenty tripped into the garden by way of the French windows that opened upon the lawn.

"She is a jolly woman," said Tom, looking after her; "isn't she?"

"Yes," said the girl, "and a great admirer of yours."

"Ah! I wish you were, Susannah."

"And am I not?"

"I don't know; I wonder!" he said. "But won't you sit down?"

He placed a chair near the fine old Italian fireplace, where the embers of the winter faggots were still smouldering and dividing the perfumes of the room and the outer garden with the flowers and the wholesome earthy smell of Spring.

Susannah sat down. It was an easy-chair, low and caressing. It brought her face almost level with the fire, the glow of which was reflected in her eyes.

"'Young people should be frank, and understand each other,'" said Tom, drawing a taller chair by her side; "we do understand each other, don't we, Susannah?"

"I am sure I hope so," she replied, turning her face towards him as he looked down into her eyes and without flinching, for he, too, alas! was playing a game, Lady Berwick's game—one of her pawns, or a more important piece.

"I can't say fine things to you, like Lord Cleeve; talking is in his line; it comes as easy as—well, as easy as anything you can think of."

"Well, and supposing it does?" said Susannah.

"I don't know why I should object, but somehow I do. I think it is because—well, would you like me better if I were more like Lord Cleeve; I mean a scholar, polished and clever at saying clever things, well up in the classics, and all that?"

"I should not like any one the less for being like Lord Cleeve; but one had better be like oneself, don't you think? I don't want you like any one else. I have no great opinion of myself, but I don't want to be any other person or like any other."

"No, of course not. You know, you are far cleverer than I am, Susannah, know a heap of things I don't.

I never could bear to pore over tasks, but I was captain of everything outside college."

"Yes, I know. It is not everybody that has the gift of knowledge, I mean the knowledge that makes men famous in art and literature and politics."

"No, that is so; but it is not to a fellow's discredit if he has gifts, let us say, for the cricket field and that kind of thing; and there's one thing we should always agree upon; we both like horses; and I'm awfully fond of gardening and natural history, and wouldn't you like to travel?"

"Sometimes I think I would," said Susannah.

"Do you know," said Tom, suddenly, "I have grown jealous of you?"

"Jealous!" she said, looking at the fire.

"Yes, jealous," he said, his voice a trifle hoarse; "jealous of everybody that looks at you, that speaks to you. Susannah, I am going to turn over a new leaf; I'm going to study, to work. I feel at last a desire to fulfil the Vicar's hopes for me, to make my way, to get on."

He was acting splendidly. Perhaps he felt a throb of the action of the scene. He might well have done so, had he been the most hardened reprobate, looking down upon that lovely figure in its graceful pose, with the firelight in its eyes and the sun upon its rich brown hair gathered about the white shapely neck.

"Yes," she said, in a whisper.

"But I need one thing, one incentive."

He seized her hand; she rose from her chair.

"Your love, Susannah, your love!" And with well-affected passion he stole his arm about her waist and drew her into his arms. "I love you; be my wife!"

"Let me go," she said, struggling from his embrace, and bursting into tears.

"You are angry."

"No," she sobbed, "not angry."

"I have offended you."

"No," she answered, "I am bewildered; it is all so sudden. Oh, Tom, you should have given me a little warning."

"I know, I know, I am sorry, I ought," said Tom, following up his advantage. "I have kept it to myself, but it has always been here, at my heart. I didn't dare to tell you; felt the Vicar would think I wasn't good enough; then I thought you might have an idea, don't you know, that I was after your money. But to-day; it is Spring, and there's hope in everything, and I got courage.—But you don't love me, Susannah —let me call you Sue, my own Sue!"

And once more, how she knew not, she found herself in Tom's arms, and this time she did not struggle away from him. He had taken her by storm. She had struck her colours under the impulse of surprise.

"There is some one else to consult and consider besides ourselves, Tom; one whom I love and reverence as if he were my father, as well as yours."

"Will you say yes, if he agrees? Don't blight all my hopes in life, Sue,—let the Vicar be indeed a father to us both, don't you know."

"If the Vicar gives his consent, Tom, I——"

"He will, he will!" exclaimed Tom, before the girl had time to finish her sentence; he feared there might be a qualification, which he would at once nip in the bud.

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, yes."

"Give me time to think, dear," she said.

The endearing word settled it; he would have her answer now, and he pressed it, kissing her hands the while.

"Don't break my heart," he said, once more, with a hoarseness that suggested emotion. "I only say if the Vicar consents, if—supposing he doesn't, then it is all off. Say I may hope; say you will be my wife. I don't want to hamper you with a date, or anything of that kind. I will work and be worthy of you and the Vicar and all our friends; I will, I swear it, by all you hold dear and holy! Is it yes?"

She laid her head upon his shoulder, and the tears once more welled into her eyes.

"Of course we must have the dear Vicar's consent," said Lady Mephistopheles; for she had been standing in the doorway during several minutes, standing as demurely as a saint, a basket of flowers in her hand. "The dear, kind old Vicar! And we will have it, never fear."

Tom smiled, and taking Susannah's arm in his with a playful familiarity, said, "Now, Lady Berwick, do you think we understand each other?"

"I always did think so."

"But you seem to doubt whether the Vicar will give his consent," said Susannah, timidly; "and yet you said the match would please him."

"And I am sure it will, dear," said her ladyship, in her softest and most propitiatory manner, "but we must not be in too great a hurry. Tom has his way to make, you know, and must have time to begin fairly."

"Yes. It is all so very sudden," said the girl; "I would much rather have waited." And she seemed as if she would withdraw her arm from Tom's; but the

triumphant young reprobate only drew it closer within his own.

"It would certainly have been more discreet to have waited before making a definite engagement, or at all events it would have been wiser to have first asked the Vicar's consent. But who expects to find wise heads on young shoulders? Not the Vicar, I'm sure. It is enough that the heads are handsome. But there, go along, enjoy these sweet moments alone; and leave the rest to me."

Putting her arms round the two young people, Lady Berwick pushed them gently through the open casement upon the terrace, Tom looking over his shoulder with a well-satisfied face towards her ladyship, and Susannah submitting to be led away among the flowers which were emblematic of her own sweet innocence; and notwithstanding little thrills of remorse and little shivers of doubts and fears, she felt a new and peculiar sense of happiness. It was, however, something akin to the doubtful happiness of a dream, that has flashes of the knowledge that it is nothing more than a dream.

Lady Berwick felicitated herself upon the very successful opening of her game, and saw it for a moment as if the two figures among the flower-beds were no more than a couple of pawns which she had just moved with intentions of advancement, when her bishops and castles and her king and queen should come into play. As she turned from the window to go to her escritoire she met Keziah, who announced the arrival of Lord Cleeve.

"Good!" said her ladyship. "He's just in time to see my doves cooing."

CHAPTER XIII.

"CHECK!"

"DON'T let me disturb you, Lady Berwick," said his lordship, for Madame had taken her seat before a pile of correspondence at her desk.

She always made a point of appearing to be more than usually busy whenever the Vicar or Lord Cleeve called. Not that she did not find plenty of time to engage them in conversation; but it was part of her policy of feminine influence to have a great many things to attend to, more particularly in connection with her various philanthropic undertakings.

"Oh, no, thank you," she said, looking up, pen in hand. "I have nearly finished; Dorcas accounts this time besides the Matrons' Society. I'm sure you will sympathise with me. Just this one column of figures and then my signature, that is all. You will find the *Quarterly Review* on the table; there is an article on Old Ballads which pleased me very much."

"Thank you; it is a subject that interests me unusually at the moment."

Lady Berwick turned to her papers, made an imaginary calculation of an imaginary column of figures, signed the paper, blotted it, folded it, and placed it under a paper-weight. Then, addressing an imaginary committee, said aloud, "There, most worthy friends of Dorcas, I hope that will content you." She rose and advanced towards her visitor.

"Now, Lord Cleeve, business being over, let me

shake hands with you, and say how kind it is of you to come all this way to see me.''

''I would go much further to see you,'' he replied, her hand in his, ''and not think it a trouble, but a pleasure.''

''Thank you very much,'' she said, reluctantly withdrawing her hand and smiling upon him a world of gratitude from her expressive eyes. ''And I have not made a stranger of you ; I know how you dislike conventionality, and how much you sympathise with women who work.''

''You always make me at home, Lady Berwick ; and I feel free to say that even when complimenting a lady I always try to speak the truth. I must tell you that on this occasion I did not come only to see you. The truth is the Vicar had driven across here, and I followed him, with the intention of riding back with him.''

''With him?'' said Lady Berwick, echoing his words.

''And Miss Woodcote,'' he replied, quickly.

''Well, the Vicar has been here and will return in half an hour,'' said her ladyship.

''So soon?'' observed his lordship, regretfully.

''Thank you,'' said her ladyship. ''And Susannah is here now.''

''I must be frank again,'' said his lordship. ''I knew Miss Woodcote was here ; your maid told me so.''

''Do you, then,'' said her ladyship, ''in this beautiful frankness of yours, wish me to discount the compliment your call seemed to pay to me?''

''It is not always easy to speak the truth, Lady Berwick, without giving offence.''

"You can compensate me for my want of attraction in crediting me with good sense," she replied. "The case stands thus: I was not sufficiently attractive to keep you from the Vicar and Miss Woodcote, but Miss Woodcote and I together could hold you from the Vicar."

"You are so very kind," said his lordship, blandly.

"To myself," her ladyship responded; "for you see, I shall argue, by inference, that Miss Woodcote would not be able to draw you from the Vicar and me."

"You are as severe as you are pleasant, Lady Berwick. Your words are thistles dipped in honey."

"No, don't say so, my dear friend. I am bad enough, but the little good is not spread over a cruel nature. Oh, for a little faith, a little true friendship!"

She rose quietly from her chair, and crossed the room to her desk. Lord Cleeve contemplated her, a question passing through his mind as to her earnestness.

"Or is she trying to fool me?" he thought. Then approaching her sympathetically, he expressed a hope that he had not offended her.

"Oh, no, no, my dear friend," she said, with a reassuring smile. "Your presence is so welcome that even if some remark of yours did give me pain, I should be foolish not to conceal it. And after all, my conscience tells me I do some good."

"I hear on all hands of your kindness to the aged," said his lordship.

"And, believe me, I am not unmindful of the young," her ladyship replied with sudden cheerfulness, pointing, as she was enabled to do at the moment, to Tom and Susannah, who were passing by the lawn into the rose-garden. "Look now, but for me those young people might at this moment be engaged. But I say, wait;

you are suited in years, but not in fortune ; Tom must make his mark in the world. And Tom will ; don't you think so ?''

Lord Cleeve did not reply. His eyes were fixed upon the two young people in the garden. He did not attempt to disguise his astonishment.

''Tom will make his mark in the world ; don't you think so ?'' she repeated.

''I am sure I hope so,'' said Lord Cleeve, recovering something of his usual composure of manner.

''You don't doubt Tom ?'' asked the widow, with a double note of interrogation in the tone of her voice.

''Doubt him ?'' said his lordship. ''I don't quite understand you. The son of my old friend is naturally dear to me.''

''But you think him careless, lacking in solidity of character, giving up too much of his time to field sports, to golf and billiards and the like ?''

''Tom is young,'' his lordship replied, ''and there is no harm in field sports. Careless youth sometimes changes into serious manhood.''

''Always generous,'' said her ladyship. ''Shall we join them ?''

''Join them ?'' said Lord Cleeve.

''I mean in the garden,'' she replied, without showing how pleased she was at the success of her little *double entendre.*

''Well, no, I think not. My presence might disturb them.''

''Oh, do you think so ?''

''I have not seen Tom for some little time.''

''No ?''

''And something tells me that it would be best that I should not extend my call.''

"Not to see the Vicar?"

"I shall see him later."

"But will you not speak to Miss Woodcote?"

"Not now, thank you."

"Perhaps you will meet the Vicar on the road?"

"Perhaps."

"By the way, do you think he ought to know of what is likely to happen?"

"What, in your opinion, is likely to happen, Lady Berwick?"

"Don't you see a prospective bride and bridegroom yonder?" she replied, pointing to the garden.

"Do you?"

"I think so. Why not?"

"I have observed, Lady Berwick, in novels, that when the lover proposes, it is customary for the blushing maiden, or even the blushing widow—widows do blush, at least in novels—to exclaim, 'It is all so sudden!'"

"Widows can blush out of novels, Lord Cleeve, and have often had cause for surprise at declarations of the kind you mention; but your lordship was alluding to——"

"My own astonishment at your prophetic view of the little scene in the garden."

"You are so frank."

"So was Eve," said his lordship.

"And Adam, so mean," she said, laughing. "But we are straying from the subject. Shall you tell the Vicar?"

"It is not my business, is it?" he asked, drawing on his gloves.

"No, perhaps not; and, as you say, it may not happen."

"I don't think I said so."

"You thought so, Lord Cleeve."

"Did I? And you think I hoped so. I can only repeat my astonishment at what you have hinted."

"It is possible you may not think Tom good enough for the Vicar s ward, nor is he—nor is any man good enough for a good woman; and perhaps the Vicar may not think it a sufficiently good match for her. Yet he ought to be proud of his son, and only too glad to entrust the child of his dead friend to his care."

"It is not always the lot of a good father to be blest with a good son."

"Ah, you know something of Tom that I do not, something to his discredit. You men know each other better than we women know you; and in the Vicar's chivalrous, not to say Quixotic, love for Susannah, he may have a titled lover in view, or a very wealthy commoner."

"We are professing to be frank with each other, and are talking as enigmatically as if we were a couple of astute diplomats.—And about what?"

"It may be that the Enigma yonder," again pointing to the garden, "is puzzling us both. If you are surprised at it, you who know so much of the Vicar's household, how much more so must it have surprised me?"

"I really cannot tell," said his lordship. "Perhaps it is, after all, a little pleasantry of yours, a tribute to Spring, a comedy of good spirits. But there, I really must go. I think our friends are coming from the garden into the real world of the drawing-room; and I would not run the risk of casting a shadow on the Comedy on any account."

"You are very strange, Lord Cleeve," said her ladyship, assuming a serious tone.

"Am I? It is a strange world. Good-bye, Lady Berwick," he said, and he took her hand with an unusual assumption of cordiality and raised it to his lips.

"Good-bye," she said, with a sigh, "if you must go."

And he was gone.

"Check!" murmured her ladyship.

"Cleeve, you school-boy!" he said, as he rode off in an opposite direction from that in which he might have met the Vicar. "Cleeve, you doting idiot, you were within an ace of betraying yourself to that scheming, fascinating, and mysterious widow. But your inherited bit of common sense saved you. And yet she suspects me; and, by Jove, if I were a vain man, I should suspect her! What is the meaning of it all? Is it a comedy, that may turn out to be a tragedy? Is it a plot against Susannah, organised by Lady Berwick? It is not a genuine love-match, that is most certain. A love-match! It would break the Vicar's heart—such a love-match! . . . And surely the widow knows the sort of character Tom bears, the trouble he is to his father, and the old man's love and devotion to his ward, the daughter of his dearest friend. Is it some intrigue, the object of which is to compromise the girl? I cannot think that. Lady Berwick is not the unsophisticated, simple, kindly woman they think her in this corner of the county; she holds her own with the most worldly women of fortune in town; yet, what possible object could she have in betraying a sweet and innocent girl to the embraces of a debased young ruffian, such as Tom Hussingtree? . . . Can it be that Tom has deceived the widow with his imitation of manliness, and 'boys will be boys,' and so on, and his pleasant manners? The fellow is not without a certain charm of

bonhomie and good breeding. But a ruffian at heart! In the mystery of heredity, what ancestor of the Vicar's can be repeated in this mixture of the Joseph and Charles of Sheridan, with the Joseph all the more dangerous that he adds to his own immoralities the lesser vices of Charles?"

Thus his thoughts ran on, a very jumble of complicated doubts and unfinished plans of action. He threw the reins to the groom on arriving at the Vicarage, and went straight to his room, feeling that his love for Susannah had increased with the possible and unexpected obstacle to his happiness that Lady Berwick had shown him. Hitherto his age, compared with her youth, had been to him the chief drawback to his suit, whenever he should make up his mind to proffer it. He was forty; she not quite twenty. There were streaks of grey in his hair, but he was as young at heart as many a fellow of half his years. He had taken honours at Oxford, had lived a studious life, was something of a dreamer, had a singularly sweet smile, that was very noticeable in a somewhat melancholy countenance. A little above the medium height, he was not one of those men who arrest attention at first sight. His bearing was so modest that you might pass him by while a less distinguished person attracted your attention; but, introduced to him, you would soon be conscious of his natural charm of manner, the frank expression of his hazel eyes, and you would not be surprised to learn that he was a man of parts, too honest for a mere politician, and too fond of books to be very much attracted by Society. How far his secret love for Susannah Woodcote had, during a couple of years, influenced his conduct or shaped his character, it is hard to say.

CHAPTER XIV.

"A WICKED AND A DISAPPOINTING WORLD."

"WHO do you think has been here?" said Lady Berwick, as Susannah and Tom entered the room from the garden. "Lord Cleeve! He had ridden on to meet the Vicar. He noticed you in the garden, and I think he was pleased to see you walking so affectionately together."

"But I wish you had spoken to your father, Tom," said the girl, with an anxious face.

"He might have objected," said Lady Berwick, "and you know, he is very obstinate; religious people always are."

"He calls his obstinacy moral firmness, Lady Berwick," said Tom.

"Firmness is a better word than obstinacy, and for so genial and kind a man as the Vicar. You see, as Susannah's guardian and your father, he is bound to take a careful and sober view of your mutual and several prospects. I have a plan! We must take time to prepare the Vicar for the situation,—a year, say?"

"I feel as if I had done something ungrateful in pledging myself to Tom without asking the Vicar's consent; it has all been so sudden and hasty!"

"The very words of Lord Cleeve," said the widow.

"Did you tell him?" asked Susannah, quickly.

"No, he saw you walking in the garden. I believe Tom's arm was round your waist."

The girl blushed, and hung her head.

"It would grieve me dreadfully to hurt the Vicar's

feelings, to seem ungrateful, and not to confide in him. Lord Cleeve will tell him," she said.

"I think not," her ladyship replied; "indeed, he said it was not his business to do so."

"You talked about it?" said the girl, eagerly.

"Just in a casual way."

"And he said it was very sudden?"

"Yes."

"And so it is; too sudden, I fear, to be good. Oh, Tom! Oh, Lady Berwick!"

Susannah buried her face in her hands, and sank into a chair.

"My dear child," said the widow, in soft and tender tones, "my love, you are hysterical. I don't wonder, it is quite natural; I was just the same when my first lover made me an offer, though I was not your age. There, don't give way."

She sat by her side, and kissed her wet cheeks and fondled her, and Tom stood by ejaculating such encouraging remarks as, "Susie, my dear girl," "I hate to see you cry," "Cheer up," "I know it's kind of serious, as they say, but it happens to everybody."

Then Susannah rose, and wiped her eyes and tried to smile; and the widow emptied half a scent bottle upon her head and mopped her brow, and the girl said she felt better.

"As Tom says, it happens to everybody; all young people look to be married some day or other."

"But nobody is to know that we even think of it for at least a year," said Susannah.

"Not for a whole year," said the widow; "but you'll keep your word, Susannah dear," and she took her into her arms and embraced her, an office of confirmation and pleasure that Tom was about to perform

himself; but the widow had other views. As she released her, she placed Susannah's hand in Tom's and addressed them both in a kind of betrothal speech.

"Nothing is sweeter in life than to assist at the betrothal of two young people in the same station of life, where faith lends an additional charm to constancy. I am witness to this happy exchange of vows, and, if Tom will allow me, I shall bestow upon Susannah a memorial of this day."

Whereupon, to the surprise of both, she took from her little finger a ring—"The ring of betrothal," she said, as she held it up, and then, taking Susannah's unresisting hand, she placed upon her third finger the diamond loop, exclaiming, as she did so, "There, my love, you have my best wishes, and you will leave to me the proper time to make your peace with the Vicar."

Then she kissed Susannah fervently, and concluded her subtle plot with the remark, "Ah, my dear, you don't know how much more I love you now."

A knock at the door, and Keziah entered, announcing the Vicar.

Susannah turned hot and cold. Tom bit his lip, and pressed his feet firmly upon the yielding carpet.

"We were just talking of you, Vicar," said the widow. "Susannah is quite ready."

"Thank you, Lady Berwick," answered the Vicar, as he turned to Tom, with an expression something between rebuke and surprise. "I thought you had gone to Wulstan, my boy."

"Lady Berwick wanted to see me about the gymnasium," Tom replied, with a ready lie.

"Always busy, always scheming, always planning," said the Vicar, turning from Tom to the widow, whose moral consciousness was shaken for a moment under

what, at first blush, seemed to be an equivocal compliment.

"Wisely, I mean,—for the good of others," said the Vicar, as if he had divined her thought.

"You are so very kind," the widow replied. "Will you allow your coachman to carry a basket of flowers I have been plucking to the Vicarage?—Coals to Newcastle, I know, but my gardener took a prize at the Horticultural Show last week."

Then to Keziah, she said, "Saunders will give you a basket; have it put into the Vicar's carriage."

"You are so very kind!" repeated the Vicar, bending over her hand with an air of old-world politeness.

"My best friend," murmured Susannah, at parting.

"You are a jolly sort," whispered Tom.

"A charming woman," said the Vicar, as they drove away, "but I fear she wastes your time, Tom."

"Very sorry, sir," Tom answered; "I couldn't well refuse to look after the gymnasium."

"No, I suppose not," the Vicar replied. "I hope you had a pleasant chat, Susannah."

"Yes," said his perturbed ward.

"Very pleasant?" queried the Vicar. "I thought you seemed a little sad."

"Oh, no, dear," said Susannah, turning her head aside to avoid his glance of inquiry.

Lady Berwick, from behind an arbutus on the terrace, watched the carriage trundling along the white highway and kissed her hand at it with a triumphant smile.

"A good day's work," she said; "but you can do a great deal in a day if you have laid your plans beforehand. I wonder how the game will develop? Cleeve moves next. I believe I see the end of it; but who knows? It is a wicked and a disappointing world!"

CHAPTER XV.

WITHOUT GLOVES.

THE cottage that Birket Foster would have loved to paint was embowered in the golden leaves of the last days of September.

Lizzie Melford had found her trouble unbearable, and it was the eve of the Comberton Harvest Home. She had assisted to decorate the church with flowers and wreaths of corn. But she could not face the happy ceremony of the morrow. She had reckoned how long it would take her to walk to the railway junction at Shrub Hill, where the Mail from the West stopped for five minutes on its way to London.

It was a bitter thing to steal away like a thief in the night; but worse still to stay and bear the contumely of her sin and refrain from justifying her wickedness; to have the pity of Lady Berwick, and the rebuke, however gentle, of the Vicar. She knew London as the refuge of the wretched as well as the Mecca of the happy and the free; so she resolved to take the midnight train to town.

Neither the station-master nor the porters at Shrub Hill knew her. Nevertheless, when she entered the little waiting-room she gathered her cloak about her, and crept into a corner as if she would hide herself even from herself.

She had twenty pounds in her pocket, all her little savings, besides the trinkets that Tom had given her from time to time, and her Bible that had belonged to

her father, John Melford, when she was a child, before her mother married Macfarlane, a lumpish Northerner, who seemed to care for nobody in the whole world except the Vicar's reprobate son, for whom he would willingly have laid down his life. Such is the slavish devotion that may still obtain between master and servant. Macfarlane and Tom had indeed almost been playmates, though Macfarlane was old enough to have been his grandfather. Tom was a born sportsman, and Macfarlane had taught him pretty well all he knew in the varied arts of angling, snaring game, riding, driving and shooting, in all of which things he was an expert when little more than a lad. One can therefore understand how hard it would be for Macfarlane to be separated from the fortunes of the young fellow, when the seeds he had sown began to bear prickly fruit and father and son quarrelled.

In the mean time, Lizzie, in the corner of a second-class carriage, shunning all communication with her fellow-passengers, was being rushed along at the rate of sixty miles an hour into the arms of that "cruel stepmother," London.

Next morning, her mother, who had in the girl's estimation wronged the memory of her father by marrying Macfarlane, had news of her flight in a brief letter,—the old story, with a difference,—in which she begged all who respected her to forget her ; she was no longer the Lizzie they knew ; but they need have no fear that she would do herself a mischief ; she would be able to earn a living, and they might be sure she would bring no further disgrace upon the village than might lie in her sudden desertion of the place where she had been so happy and so miserable.

If Lizzie's father had lived, she would most likely

have been spared her great trouble. Her mother was a weak, silly kind of woman, who regarded the girl's little refinements and unusual learning for a village maiden as "ower fine affectations," and Macfarlane was rather her enemy than her friend; not that he had willingly connived at the secret meetings of Lizzie and Tom, but he had known of them long before he had become fearful and unhappy as to the result.

Why Lizzie's mother had married such a dolt as David Macfarlane no one understood. It certainly was not a marriage of affection, but rather one of *convenance*, if one may apply the term to such a humble union. Macfarlane had been in the Vicar's service for many years, as under-gardener, head-gardener, and man-of-all-work. Soon after her widowhood Lizzie's foolish mother thought he was entitled to the chief position in the Vicar's employment; so he became her husband, and Lizzie's step-father. He had felt something like jealousy of Lizzie's intimacy with Tom Hussingtree, and when he came to understand how Tom had abused the privilege, he was inclined to blame Lizzie rather than her betrayer.

To Macfarlane's thinking she was always a forward young minx, with ideas above her station, and her rivalry with her betters, talking with Lady Berwick almost on equal terms, and the like. Though he was of an independent spirit himself, he knew his place, as he often remarked to his wife; but her daughter Lizzie was above it, much above it, and pride must have its fall. The girl had not betrayed her secret; they only guessed at it, and as for doing or saying anything to hurt the position or prospects of Tom Hussingtree, nothing was further from her thoughts. She was just as willing a sacrifice to the manly charms of Tom as

Macfarlane to his sentiment of yeoman's service, and she hardly ever remembered to think of Luke Fenton, who had stood up for her so bravely and loved her so well.

Luke said not a word when he heard that Lizzie Melford had fled, but started straightaway for her grandmother's house. Nothing had been heard of her there. Then he went to Wulstan, wandered about the city, spied into every possible haunt where one in Lizzie Melford's position might seek shelter. He found no trace of her. This occupied several days. He returned to Comberton, and met, by accident, Tom Hussingtree riding in the direction of Powyke House.

"A word with you, if you please," said Luke, placing himself in the rider's path.

"I don't please," Tom replied, putting spurs to his horse, that leaped forward at this unusual goad, for her master very rarely used spur or whip.

Almost at the same moment Luke jumped for the animal's head. The mare lifted him from his feet.

"You fool, you'll be killed!" roared Tom, as the animal plunged and foamed at the mouth.

Luke made no reply, but clung to her head, gripping it by the rings and cheek-bits of the curb, with both hands.

"Curse you!" shouted Tom, as the mare, unable to free herself from the strange impediment at her head, flung out her heels.

Luke swinging beneath the animal's head suddenly pulled it almost to the ground and Tom with it.

"Leave go, you blackguard!" Tom shouted, "leave go!"

"Get off," said Luke, "or I'll fling you."

"So ho, mare, so ho!" said Tom, loosening his rein. "Let go her head, and I'll dismount."

Luke let go. The mare stood stock still and trembled in every limb.

"So ho, my lass, so ho!" said Tom, slipping out of the saddle and patting her neck, "that's my beauty!"

The mare turned her head towards him. He rubbed her nose and patted her, saying, "It's all right, my girl. We don't want to have the lunatic's blood upon our hands, damn him all the same!"

The mare looked about her in an inquiring way and then rubbed her nose against her master. Luke stood by unmoved.

"I know, old girl, I know the man's a fool," said Tom, as he led her to a gate and flung the bridle over the post; "quiet now, quiet." Once more the mare was herself again, and subject to command. She stood impassively as Tom turned upon Luke with his crop raised and ready to strike a blow if necessary.

"Now, what do you want with me?" he said. "I could have trampled you into a mummy, had I minded; and I can brain you now, and will, if you don't take care what you've got to say."

Tom's eyes flashed as he spoke, but they were answered by a steadfast look of defiance.

"I don't think you could have trampled me into a mummy; I don't think you can brain me now. Tie up your horse, come over the gate yonder into old Jackson's meadow, and try it; nobody's likely to disturb us, and you shall use your crop, too; you're coward enough."

"Mind what you say, Fenton. I don't want to do you an injury."

"You've done me the greatest injury already that you can ever do me; but I'm not here to worry over that. As I told you at starting, I only want a word

with you ; but if fighting is more to your taste, I'm your man, and I tell you I'll give you your whipstock in,—you seem to be holding it so handy."

Tom had flourished his crop while he spoke, and Luke had watched the swing of it keenly and with a ready eye.

Though he was not a physical coward, Tom quailed before the desperate expression and ready manner of Luke, a spare man, but muscular, gaunt of face and wiry of build, no match, one would have thought, for the broad-shouldered, well-fed, sturdy-looking young squire of Comberton ; nevertheless, a man of a desperate persistency.

"If you think I am going out with you to play at fisticuffs, you are mistaken ; but if you want a good cudgelling, I'm *your* man, Master Luke Fenton !" said Tom, with an affectation of carelessness.

"Are you, by God !" exclaimed Luke ; and the next moment Tom was disarmed, Luke flinging his crop into the meadow, and Tom, "on guard," was awaiting the blow that he expected to follow.

"Put down your hands, I'm not going to hit you," said Luke. "I spare you, for her sake ; one day I may kill you for the same reason. At present I only want to know where she is ?"

"Where who is ?"

"There is only one she I am likely to inquire after, and you know it. I refer to Lizzie Melford. Where is she ?"

"I don't know."

"You know she has left Comberton ?"

"Yes."

"And you don't know where she has gone ?"

"No."

"On your oath,—not that your oath is worth much, but there is a superstition about oaths that may even touch you ; on your oath?"

"On my solemn oath, Fenton," said Tom, turning now to fasten his mare securely to the gate, and patting her into quietude.

"You know why she has left Comberton?"

"Perhaps."

"You do know, because you advised her where to go."

"You heard that when you were eaves-dropping?"

"I was not eaves-dropping intentionally."

"You heard two people talking, and you stood aside to listen."

"*You* did not mind that God Himself was listening," said Luke.

"I don't appreciate psalm-singing," Tom replied, with a sneer.

"You don't mind that the Devil might be looking on, and applauding his disciple."

"It was enough for me that you were sneaking around to trap the girl, who wouldn't listen to you even on scriptural grounds," said Tom, beginning to feel his feet and take stock of the situation.

"If I thought you would do the girl justice, Mr. Tom Hussingtree, I would not say another word, except, 'God speed, go your ways both, and be happy.' "

"How do you know I don't mean to do her justice, as you say?

"Because I overheard your vile confession and worse advice."

"Oh, you did, did you?"

"I did ; but even now, if you would relent and do

the right thing ; if you would go to the Vicar and tell him all ; if you would be true and honest and straight, and seek her out and repair the mischief you have done, or show a desire to repair it, and——''

"Oh, look here, I've no more time to waste in being preached at. Go to the devil !''

"I don't mind where I go when you have lifted that poor foolish, confiding girl back upon the path that Society and the world consider the path of honour and respectability. Until you do that, I am going to make this world just as hot for you as the place you tell me to go to.''

"Oh, you are !'' said Tom, noting a growing limpness of attitude in his enemy that favoured attack. "Then let's settle it at once.''

All suddenly he whipped off his coat and vest, laid aside his watch and chain ; and, as he did so, so likewise did Luke.

"In the meadow?'' said Luke.

"No, here.''

Tom stepped a little way down the road, well clear of his horse, and with a "Damn-you-to-hell !'' he struck the first blow and drew the first blood. It was cowardly done, and an act that Tom would not have committed before witnesses, for he had had a fairly good Oxford athletic training ; but here he felt unequal to Luke, whose cause was just, and he feared him.

"Coward !'' said Luke, pushing back his hair, the blood streaming down his face.

"Beast !'' was Tom's rejoinder, accompanying a lunge at Luke's ribs, well parried by Luke and answered with a blow under the right ear that sent Tom staggering, followed up by a knock-down blow that laid him on the ground, half stunned. In a fight under

the Queensbury rules, Tom would have been counted out; but presently he struggled to his feet and faced his man for the next round.

"I shall kill you," said Luke, wiping the blood from his face with the back of his hand.

"Then do it, you infernal thief, do it!" snarled Tom, the passion of murder in his heart too; and the men faced each other. Tom was pale to the lips.

The art was with Tom; the earnestness and energy, the right with Luke. It was a fairly equal match, and each of them understood that it was so; for after the first hard and desperate round they fenced and watched each other.

Presently Tom lunged at his enemy, a straight blow for the region of the heart; it was countered cleverly, and as Tom sprang back a pace Luke hit him squarely on the jaw. Tom recovered the blow with pluck and dexterity, and, defending himself with his right, hit out unexpectedly with his left, leaving his mark on Luke's cheek. There was no umpire to call "Time," no audience to see fair play. The two men, however, as if they realised that wrestling was not in the game, at length struggled free from each other and paused. Luke pushed his hair back, and untying his neckerchief mopped his face with it. Tom breathed heavily and leaned against old Jackson's gate.

As if obeying the call of the next round from some mysterious director of the sport, Tom presently stood forward, and Luke, flinging down his neckerchief, faced him once more, but evidently (as Tom did not fail to notice with satisfaction) suffering, though, truth to tell, Tom up to now was the hardest hit; his head was beating like a steam-hammer, but he went for Luke

doggedly. It stimulated him to curse, and with an oath he flung out once more at his adversary.

Luke parried the blow, and countered the next with one in the face. Then the two began to walk round each other and fence, Luke fairly dancing until Tom planted a staggering blow under his opponent's jaw that seemed to lift him from his feet, following it with a second squarely and hard on the heart, under which Luke collapsed. Tom designedly flung himself upon him as he fell, and clutched him by the throat. Luke did not heed the foul act, but lay still, as if he had breathed his last. Then Tom, in alarm, released his grip, and went for his brandy flask.

It was some time before Luke recovered. So soon as he was able to stand, Tom led him to the roadside and left him. The Vicar, driving that way, found him there an hour afterwards, and drove him to an adjacent cottage, where he was known and cared for. Tom, meanwhile, had taken a short cut, not to Lady Berwick's nor to the Vicarage, but to the Coventry Arms, close by the Shrub Hill Junction. Here he gave himself a rub down. Pretending that he had had a spill, he went to a doctor, who lived hard by ; and at dusk returned to the Vicarage, not much the worse physically for his encounter, but with a certain moral trepidation concerning Lizzie Melford and what should happen when the Vicar knew, as he shortly must, why his interesting little parishioner had fled from Comberton.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN INTERRUPTED MELODY.

THEY called it the Vicar's room. It was neither library, chapel, nor treasure house; but a little of all three. It had a cosy air of learning, with a certain monastic dignity. Books, curios, pictures, an organ, an iron safe enclosed in an old oak cabinet, and everything and anything the Vicar might be likely to want in the way of work and intellectual recreation. He loved reading, was fond of music, and at certain hours of the day it was understood that he was not to be disturbed. There was no law of this kind. The Vicar was the last man in the world to institute rules and regulations. But the household had come to know, as if by instinct, what the Vicar liked, and the chief desire of the entire establishment was to please him. In this, to a great extent, they got their inspiration from Susannah Woodcote, who, since the death of the Vicar's wife, had become the very life and soul of the Vicarage, its guide and administrator; and yet without letting the check of her hand be felt, preserving to all appearance the girlishness of seventeen.

It was Autumn now; and the Vicar, sitting at his organ, felt the sombre influences of the time and put his reflections into his music. He was the picture of a lovely and dignified old age, as he sat before the little chamber instrument in his clerical coat, his thick grey hair pushed away from his broad open forehead. Modulating melody after melody that ranged through the

past, as his mind wandered backwards, he found his fingers presently recalling the old German air, "In Sheltered Vale," the old song of the Mill-Wheel, that had many sweet and pathetic associations in his memory.

"Strange!" he said, leaning back in his seat and pausing. "When I feel the pain of a sorrow that is not altogether sad, that tuneful melody comes unbidden to my fingers—my wife's favourite! Poor Mary! How beautiful she was! I can see her now, teaching Tom to play it, kissing and chiding his little fat fingers that could hardly reach the keys! Tom! Ah, I fear he would have been a sad disappointment to his mother, had the Lord spared her to have remained with us. . . . She looked forward to a gentle, though chivalrous son, I to a youngster as brave as he was good! . . . I remember at College being what one might call a man of peace, nevertheless attracted by the fellow who was cock of the walk at football, cricket, billiards, stroke of the winning crew, a steeple-chaser, and who once thrashed a bargee for insulting a lady. I was more of a book man and a dreamer; one admires that in another which one does not possess oneself. . . . Tom rides with the skill of a jockey and the manner of a gentleman; stroke in the Oxford crew, champion at billiards, the best bowler in the best cricket team—and yet! . . . And yet, in my priestly experience these achievements too often go hand in hand with drink and debauchery. . . . The trainer's regulations nevertheless make for virtue; but the restraint over——Ah, well, I will not think of it. I will hope for the best, and pray for it——"

As the melody of the old song once more began to fill the atmosphere of the room there was a knock on the outer door, an apologetic kind of knock, an uncer-

tain wavering summons twice or thrice repeated before the Vicar heard it. Presently he took his foot from the pedal, and with a quiet "Come in," rose from his seat as his man-servant opened the door.

"Pardon me, your reverence, but the County Inspector of Police is desirous to speak with you."

"Very well, Rogers; I will see him."

"I felt sure you would," said the officer in question, passing by the servant and closing the door with an air of authority, "though I shall not prove a very welcome visitor."

"Don't say that, Bradley. What is it?"

"Your son, Vicar."

"My son! Is he hurt?"

"No, sir, not hurt."

"Thank God! I had warned him so often since that spill he had on the Powyke road against riding his favourite mare without a curb."

"It's about that spill I've called," said the Inspector.

"Yes? Take a seat, Bradley."

"Thank you, sir," said Bradley, laying his smart military-looking cap on the floor and his cane beside it. "You set me on to find out what had become of the girl, Lizzie Melford."

"Yes?" said the Vicar, standing with his back to the fire, and the next minute pacing the room restlessly.

"Well, Vicar, that spill was not a spill; it was a fight he had with Luke Fenton. You remember finding Fenton by the road, a good deal knocked about?"

"Having been attacked by a tramp, and robbed? I hope he has quite recovered?"

"He was taken from the cottage to the County Hospital at Wulstan, as you are aware, sir."

"Yes, I know, Bradley. Get on; you are usually

outspoken ; you have something painful to tell me that concerns my son ; you wish to spare my feelings. I thank you. But don't keep me in suspense."

"Two days ago we thought Fenton was dying ; the doctors thought so. Fenton believing it, confessed a thing that will shock you ; though it did not surprise me. I had seen Mr. Tom and the girl together more than once or twice under suspicious circumstances."

"What girl?"

"Lizzie Melford."

"Well, Bradley? Go on," said the Vicar, his face turned to the window, where, over nearly a mile of wheat lands, bordering the lawn and copse of the Vicarage, the harvesters were at work.

"You see, Vicar, it was not Luke Fenton that was her lover, but Mr. Tom Hussingtree. Luke got to know of this, heard the girl's confession of her condition, was a witness to Tom's avowal that he could not marry her, and heard him advise her to go away for a time on a visit to an aged, poor relation, one Granny Dene, and nobody would be the wiser ; he would provide for her, and the like—the old story you must have heard yourself, Vicar, again and again in your ministrations. It's common enough in the annals of the police."

"A witness of her confession and Tom's avowal of guilt, you say?"

"Overheard by accident."

"An eaves-dropper!" said the Vicar, with a momentary desire to defend his son.

"Not exactly, Vicar. You see, Fenton loved the girl, was a reformed character for her sake, studied and became what other chaps called stuck-up and the rest ; and he was entering the Homestead cottage to

speak a few serious words, as you may say, to the girl, when he was pulled up by seeing your son and Lizzie sitting side by side. She was crying and asking him to wed her, and take her away to some foreign land, and she would be his slave and the like."

"And indeed he shall marry her, if this be true!" said the Vicar, clenching his white hands and pacing the room in such unwonted anger that the Inspector apologised for ruffling him.

"Don't mind me, Bradley."

"Well, sir, a day or two afterwards the girl disappeared; and a week later, Fenton, having looked for her everywhere in the hope of rendering her any necessary assistance, came back to Comberton."

"The villagers said he had gone away with her."

"But David Macfarlane knew better."

"Did he?"

"And his sister Keziah knew better."

"You think so?"

"I am sure so. They didn't know, mind you, what had really happened; nor, perhaps, on their oath could they have said she had not gone away with Fenton; but they knew your son had given the girl presents."

"A foolish, pretty, vain child!" said the Vicar.

"Well, sir, Fenton met your son on the Powyke road, demanded of him where the girl was. Master Tom knew that Luke knew how guilty he was."

The Vicar sat down, and covered his face with his hands.

"Your son tried to ride over him, but Fenton seized the reins. Master Tom dismounted. They had high words; Fenton challenged him to fight; they fought; and in the closing round your son, having hit Fenton upon the heart, fell upon him, seized him by the throat,

and would have strangled him, only that he found the man to be dying, as he thought."

The Vicar wiped his face, thrust his hands into his pockets, and paced the room.

"Then he gave him brandy from a flask, lifted him to the road-side, and, as soon as Fenton had recovered breath and his senses, he left him—where you found him."

"And the story of the tramp?"

"A put-up tale, to save your feelings. Fenton knew it would be a terrible blow to you. Also, he hoped by secrecy to still make it easy for your son to do justice to the girl."

"And so he shall—and so he shall!" said the Vicar.

"As if the confession had relieved the man's body as well as his mind, he has got better ever since, and is likely to recover."

"Thank God for that!" said the Vicar. "To-morrow I will go and see him. To-day I will speak to my son, and make it easy, as you say, for him to marry this unhappy girl—if what you have told me is true."

"You may depend on its being true," said the Inspector; "but I am sorry to say that I have not obtained any trace of the girl. The night porter at Shrub Hill has an idea that she walked to that station and went to London by the night mail; but he's a good deal of a puddin'-head, the night porter at Shrub Hill, and it's like looking for a needle in a bottle of hay to look for the girl in London. As for the fear that she might have committed suicide, her letter denies that strong enough, and she was not the sort; she would be a courageous girl. Her father was a fine man, just

as her mother is a molly-coddle; and I haven't a shadow of doubt she's all right somewhere. She took with her at least thirty pounds, and when her trouble's over, she'll get employment, and write home. You'll see if I am not right; and, meantime, I won't relax any effort at hunting her up, depend upon it."

Then the Inspector, a grey-eyed, intelligent, well-built fellow, took up his cap and stick and stood at "Attention," as if he had been a soldier who had concluded his report of a sortie.

"Thank you, Bradley. You were right in thinking your information would make me unhappy; but I thank you all the same. You have done your duty; I shall try and do mine. I will show you out, Bradley."

"Oh, thank you, sir," said Bradley, standing aside while the Vicar opened the door. "You know that I would bring you good news with real pleasure."

"I know, I know," said the Vicar. "Let us hope for a little sunshine——"

"Couldn't have had finer harvest weather, your reverence," said Bradley, "nor finer crops; though it don't make much difference to the farmer, considering as the imports fixes his price about the same, good crops or bad."

"That is so, I fear," said the Vicar, by this time in the hall, where the Inspector touched his cap and they parted.

CHAPTER XVII.

LORD CLEEVE'S CONFESSION TO THE VICAR.

"Oh, Tom, Tom!" said the Vicar, as he closed the door of his room, and sat down by the fire in a sorrowful humble mood. "Tom, Tom! Perhaps it was in Divine forethought that your mother was taken away, that she might not break her heart in sorrow. . . . How happy the harvesters look! They are sitting down to their tea. And yonder is Susannah, making it for them from the great urn. . . . Poor Susannah! She will pity me, and love me the more, when she knows of my great disappointment. It was surely heaven that put it into my mind to have no compact made between Tom and that sweet girl. . . . Though I loved him, I knew he would be no match for her. And was she not a trust, she and her noble fortune? . . . But it is a sin that can be repaired! Lizzie is a gentle creature, learned in her girlish way, of excellent manners—and Tom is young. Both are young, both foolish. Why should we look for ripe fruit in the Spring time? It may be all for the best. It is hard to say. . . . There are lovely and prosperous corners of the earth where the sinner and the unfortunate can make fresh starts in life, among strangers, who may come to love and respect them. . . . They could never live it down in Comberton, or Powyke, or Shrub Hill. . . . A new land, on a new road, with a new and sobered ambition; and I can help them. . . . They need not want for money and encouragement. The

help of good prayers and honest 'God-speeds' would be with them. . . . Yes, yes. Who knows? I may learn to love my daughter-in-law, and even bless the folly of my son. . . . And yet, I fear I am cheating myself into these optimistic hopes. . . . It is a bitter grief!"

Lord Cleeve, having knocked at the door without receiving any reply, had entered. He was in riding dress.

"I disturb you," he said.

"No; you could not be more welcome," said the Vicar.

"I thought this would be a good time to break in upon your privacy."

"My room is ever open to you, Cleeve, as my heart is."

"Thank you, Hussingtree, thank you," said his lordship. "I know that we are all admitted presently; it was a happy thought of Miss Woodcote to requisition the Vicar's room for afternoon tea."

"Susannah dislikes formality; but it is very good of everybody not to take exception to the widower's tea-table. At present Susannah is making tea for the harvesters, do you see?"

The Vicar went to the window. His lordship stood by his side.

"Yes. I saw her as I rode in from Cleeve."

"What did you ride, Cleeve, the steel horse or the real one,—the machine-made thing or the living companion?"

"I rode the bay, Vicar; but I could have come in half the time on the wheel."

"The world is altogether too much in a hurry, Cleeve, and life is becoming merely mechanical."

"I wonder if I am in a hurry in what I am going to say to you?"

"Let me hear what it is. Sit down, old friend. I hope *you* don't bring me bad news."

"Bad news?" said Lord Cleeve. "Have you had bad news? You look rather sad; I thought so as I entered the room."

"I have had news that is bad. I hope it may turn out for the best; but a clergyman, Cleeve, sees a good deal of the dark side of life; he has, however, his consolations, and God knows what is best. But there, don't mind me. I am a little disturbed. You come on some matter of business, eh? I long for a fresh subject of thought. What is it, Cleeve? What is it?"

"Why, the truth is——" said his lordship, with hesitation, and patting his boot with his crop.

"Well, the truth is—why all this hesitation? Is the subject a pleasant one?"

"To me—yes—very! But I——"

"What is pleasant to you will always be pleasant to me."

Lord Cleeve flung himself back in his chair, and laughed.

"Well?" said the Vicar, a smile playing around his genial mouth and wrinkling the crows'-feet about his frank, honest eyes.

"Upon my life, there must be something wrong about it, for I feel absurd in speaking of it."

"Well?" said the Vicar, encouragingly.

"I could laugh at myself," his lordship continued. "I'll be generous; you shall have the laugh. You asked me if I had bad news for you. I don't know whether it is good or bad; at all events there is no disaster in it—so far."

"Too much prologue, Cleeve," said the Vicar, "too much exordium! Was it not Hamlet who urged the Player to come to Hecuba?"

"Dear old friend," Cleeve replied, dropping his voice and looking a little shame-faced, "I am in love."

"That does not appear to me to be absurd or laughable," said the Vicar, his earnest eyes bent upon Cleeve, who felt as shy and bashful as a youth of twenty.

"I am glad you think so," he said.

"Love," responded the Vicar, in his gentle way, "is too beautiful to be laughed at. Nor is your declaration news, for that matter. I know you are in love, dear friend, and your love has my entire approval. But have you spoken to my ward?"

"To your ward!" said Cleeve. "How did you know?"

"How did I know! Why, there is not a person in the whole range of the Vicarage who doesn't know it; even the blind old retriever in the yard has had an inkling of it, I verily believe. The instinct of a dog is marvellous, and blind old Sally has of late taken a great fancy to you."

"Well, since you and everybody in the Vicarage and blind old Sally in the yard know all about it," said Cleeve, regaining his usual composure, "what do you wise people think of the matter?"

"Well, seriously, Cleeve," the Vicar replied, "speaking as Susannah's guardian, occupying the place of her father, loving her as if she were my own child,—I say that, although I have seen this love growing under my eyes, your frank avowal of it gives me more pleasure than I have words to express. Susannah is a fortunate girl. I congratulate you both, and myself."

The Vicar rose, and Cleeve stood up as the clergyman took his hand and wrung it heartily.

"Thank you, Hussingtree, old friend, thank you. You were always kind, and everything a generous friend and neighbour could be. But——"

"But?" said the Vicar. "Out with it; what is the 'but'? In every matter there are always 'buts' and 'ifs,' as there are spots on the sun. What is this particular 'but' of yours?"

"There are several 'buts,' and I don't know how many 'ifs,'" said Cleeve.

"Name them."

"In the first place, do you think it possible that Susannah's affections may be already engaged?"

"I know they are not."

"You know?"

"Yes."

"She has told you so?"

"No."

"Would a young girl confide a secret of that kind to any man other than the fortunate individual; even to her own guardians, good and gracious and intimate as they might be? I am not much versed in these mysteries of the heart; but——"

"I know Susannah; she would never for a moment dream of keeping from me anything so vital to her happiness, and mine. Her young life has been to me an open book for more than half of it. Besides, how could she possibly have had an opportunity of contracting so strong a sentiment for any one without my knowledge? Why, my dear friend, if I had been a jealous duenna instead of a mere country parson, I could not have been closer to her as companion and friend."

"I know it, Hussingtree, I know it, and yet that

is a 'but' I feel I have to count with ;'' and he thought of the little scene in Lady Berwick's garden. It is true nothing had occurred since to justify in the least her ladyship's suggestions. He had long since come to the conclusion that they belonged to some social scheme of Lady Berwick's that he could not fathom. Furthermore, he had deemed it right, as it was courageous, to enter the lists for the girl, whether Tom or any other were his rival. He might lose her, for the very reason that he had not put her gage in his casque and couched a lance as her champion and suitor ; so, on this Autumn afternoon, he had ridden over from Cleeve House to ask the Vicar's consent that he should lay his life and fortune at the feet of his ward—and it was no inconsiderable fortune, coupled with an unblemished title in the history of Imperial England.

"I think there is, after all, only one other important 'but,'" said Cleeve. "What will everybody say—Susannah in particular—to the fact that I am forty?"

"I know what they ought to say,—that you have had twenty years of a man's experience of the world, that you are young enough to keep a woman's love and old enough to guard it."

They both turned, as the door opened. Tom paused.

"Oh, I beg pardon. I thought you were in the garden, father. Beg pardon, Lord Cleeve. I only wanted to write a note. I'll do it in my own room."

"Tom," said the Vicar.

"Yes, father."

"I particularly desire to speak with you."

"Yes?"

"When you have written your note, come down to me."

"All right," said Tom, in a free-and-easy manner ;

remarking, as he closed the door behind him, "What's up now, I wonder?"

"Cleeve," said the Vicar, pushing his chair aside and walking to the window, "I wish I had had such a son as your father had."

"And would that I had been more worthy of one of the best fathers that ever lived!"

"He was indeed a good and most kind man, your father, Cleeve."

"I count you next in everything that ennobles humanity," Cleeve replied.

"Tom gives me great anxiety. He was the apple of his mother's eye; I have loved him very dearly."

"He is young," said Cleeve; "you must not take him too seriously. Youth will be youth; and there, by the way, he has the best of us both, Vicar."

"In what respect?" asked the Vicar, musingly.

"He has plenty of time to mend his faults; he is at the beginning of his career. I wish I were his age."

"We will not talk of him," said the Vicar, coming back to his seat; "not at present, at least; we will talk of you, and of Susannah. My dear Cleeve, you have my consent to your suit, and my support. Shall I speak to her first?"

"As you think best," said Cleeve. "I place myself in your hands."

"I will consider it. In the mean time you have my full permission to woo her and to win her. She ought to be here now; she has been with the harvesters, and the gleaners who follow them between the stacked sheaves, this last two hours. It would be a joy to me to be the first to tell her the good news."

"That is no secret, you say," said Cleeve, smiling. "Do you think blind Sally in the yard will know

when it has become the common property of the county?"

Rogers entered with a bright silver tray of tea-things.

"So late, is it?" said the Vicar. "We will resume our pleasant talk by and by;" adding, in a low voice, "when you, or I perhaps, have spoken to Susannah, eh?"

"Yes," said Cleeve, as a carriage and a pair passed along the distant road that was partially screened from the Vicarage by a sunk fence.

They both observed the vehicle and the smart livery of driver and footman as the landau skirted the lawn.

"The Lady of Powyke," said the Vicar, "for a cup of tea; a charming woman, Lady Berwick."

"Yes," said Cleeve.

"Susannah should have returned ere this."

The servant drew an old oak tea-table near the fire. The sun had declined, and there was a snap of cold in the air. The tea-urn bubbled. There was the whitest of white bread and butter on the handsomest of dishes, and the most succulent of tea-cakes under a silver cover. The tea-service was old Crown Derby, rich with blue and red and golden rims. The table was a picture; as, indeed, the room was, the outer scene of wheat and yellowing trees set in a frame of diamond panes, the centre window a long, deep bay of double doors, opening upon the garden.

Presently, radiant with dainty frills and chiffon cape, Lady Berwick, being duly announced, came sailing in like a spick and span yacht with flowing canvas and Imperial colours. She may be said to have dipped her ensign to Lord Cleeve with a royal flourish, while she saluted the Vicar with all her guns. It raised the dear

old clergyman's spirits to see her. He kissed the hand held out to him with a courtly recognition of her ladyship's friendly smile.

"And you, Lord Cleeve! So glad to see you, and looking so fresh and well; at the same time sorry to interrupt your *tête-à-tête*."

"Not at all," said Lord Cleeve.

"Our pleasant chat was at an end," said the Vicar; "by and by you shall know all about it; eh, Lord Cleeve?"

"By all means," said his lordship, with just a little hesitation.

"If it is a secret, better not trust me; I'm only a woman," said her ladyship. "But there, I must apologise again. I don't think Susannah expected me; and indeed, I had almost forgotten, until an hour or two ago, that it is my day for settling-up; is it not so, Vicar?"

"Why, yes, I believe it is; 'The Widows' Fund,' quite so."

"Doesn't settling-up sound like business?"

She turned toward Lord Cleeve as she spoke.

"It is business, is it not, Lady Berwick?"

"Just so; and it is very shrewd on my part to combine it with pleasure; a cup of tea, nice company, and settling-up, all at the same time. One moment—just let me place this half-crown in a place of security; it is inside my glove; didn't you feel it when we shook hands?"

Cleeve smiled, and bent his eyes upon her hand as she ungloved it and exhibited a half-crown. Then she took out a purse and emptied it upon the Vicar's writing-table.

"Ten pounds, twelve shillings, and nine pence half-

penny. And one sovereign more—the widow's mite—I am the widow, Lord Cleeve,—makes eleven pounds, twelve shillings, and ten pence half-penny. . . . And three half-pence for your thoughts, and we shall have something like even money."

"But you will still be out, if you pay for my thoughts," said Cleeve.

"Then you shall give me three half-pence, and keep your secret, eh?"

"You are very considerate," said Cleeve.

"Moreover," said her ladyship, as she unhooked her cape and laid it upon a chair, "pence are so hard to count; suppose we say pounds?"

"Perhaps that will be better," said Cleeve, dropping a sovereign upon the little heap of money.

"'Thank you, kindly,'" said her ladyship, with a coquettish curtsey, "'sir, she said, sir, she said, I thank you kindly, good sir, she said.'"

"Always in high spirits," said the Vicar. "You are like what an old friend of mine used to call a westerly breeze blowing across a hundred acres of mowing grass."

"He was a poet, Vicar," her ladyship answered, "with something young and lovely in his mind; not a poor widow in the Autumn of her days."

"There is the beauty of the Spring, Lady Berwick, and the beauty of the Autumn; and many a poet has found a finer inspiration for his Muse at harvest time than in the fickle days of Spring."

"Isn't the Vicar sweet?" said her ladyship, turning to Cleeve.

"You bring such good spirits with you, Lady Berwick; you are an antidote to sad thoughts. I often tell Susannah, when I contemplate a call at Powyke

House, that I am going to be cheered, to seek a tonic in the atmosphere of Lady Berwick's domain."

"If it were not for you and Susannah, and the Vicarage, dear Mr. Hussingtree, I should incontinently quit Powyke House. But there a truce to compliments. I must get on with my business," and she proceeded to count the money on the table. "Sovereigns are such easy things to reckon. Let me see—twelve pounds, twelve shillings, and ten pence half-penny——"

"And that half-crown," said the Vicar, his clean-shaven face wreathed in smiles.

"Oh, yes; don't let me forget that dear, sweet half-crown," said Lady Berwick, with a gaiety of manner that seemed to Lord Cleeve a good deal forced, but to the Vicar the frank mirthfulness of a kindly nature. "I got that solid-looking coin with George the Third's booby face upon it,—I beg pardon, no offence to the royalties of to-day or the aristocracy in general; I am a staunch Imperialist,—I got that half-crown, as I was saying, from Miles, the butcher. Oh, what a time it took me to argue him out of it! No one had ever induced him to subscribe to a charity before; but I coaxed and smiled, and wheedled him! One may do such things for a good cause, you know, Lord Cleeve."

"Oh, yes, certainly."

"Until at last poor Miles dropped a shoulder of mutton with a sigh, took that half-crown from his pocket, wiped it on his blue apron, and handed it to me with a bow! Twelve pounds, fifteen shillings, and four pence half-penny for the poor widows. Bless me! It is worth twice the money to collect it. But one must have something to do."

"Something to do, indeed!" said the Vicar. "You are everlastingly at work for other people; but you have

your reward in the happiness that comes of good deeds and acts of real charity. . . . Ah, at last here comes Susannah."

The Vicar's ward appeared at the window that opened upon the lawn, her arms full of wheat. Lord Cleeve was nearest the window, and opened it. With flushed face, and a garden hat somewhat awry, Susannah entered.

"Lady Berwick, how do you do? And Lord Cleeve? I have been playing truant; pray excuse me, I had not expected the pleasure of seeing you to-day; but it is a very great pleasure. I hope you will excuse me; I have been gleaning with the children of the village. And I thought I would have a loaf made of it. If I can get this ground, do you think there is enough to make one? I should so enjoy it!"

"My darling!" said the Vicar, playfully, "you have been taking what belongs to the poor, while Lady Berwick has been gleaning for the poor. See!"

He pointed to the money on the table.

"My settling-up day, you know, Susannah," said Lady Berwick.

"Oh, but I didn't mean to eat all the loaf myself," said Susannah, with a little laugh, "and money is not so beautiful as corn. Moreover, I didn't intend to rob anybody."

"My dear, I did not mean that," said the Vicar.

"I know, dear, I know," she replied. "But they shall have my money, and I'll keep the corn."

Hugging her little golden sheaf under one arm while she drew forth her purse, she emptied it upon Lady Berwick's miscellaneous pile, saying, "There, Lady Berwick, that's the price of my gleaning."

"Thank you, my love; but you've quite upset my

accounts," said Lady Berwick, with a vague fear in her heart that her accounts in some other direction were about to be upset.

"Don't mind that, Lady Berwick; I'll put them straight for you," said the Vicar.

Then taking Susannah by the hand, he withdrew her to a seat apart; and, glancing at Cleeve and Lady Berwick, he said, "Pray excuse me a little while; I have something interesting to say to Susannah."

Lord Cleeve looked anxiously at the Vicar, Lady Berwick shot enquiring glances at Lord Cleeve. The Vicar was too happy to observe the pained, if not protesting, expression on Cleeve's face. He thought the presence of their dear friend and neighbour, Lady Berwick, made the time more opportune than otherwise for his disclosure of Cleeve's proposal for his ward. It was hardly discreet to surprise the girl on so momentous a matter; but the Vicar, with all his sober experience of life, was occasionally impulsive; never more so than on this occasion.

"A delightful girl, is she not?" said Lady Berwick, in an aside to Cleeve, who, while retreating to the further end of the room, still kept his eyes on the Vicar and Susannah.

"Very," he answered.

"So unsophisticated, and yet so well informed," said her ladyship.

"Yes," said his lordship.

"Seems to be a serious conversation," said her ladyship. "Shall we walk in the garden?"

"Perhaps it might be as well," said his lordship.

Cleeve offered her his arm. As she took it, she said, "Susannah has not only upset my accounts, but the tea-urn is singing and the tea is waiting to be made."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE WIDOW'S GAME BECOMES SERIOUS.

"I HAVE such good news for you, Susannah," said the Vicar, "the best you ever heard."

She was sitting on a hassock by his knee, the little sheaf of wheat still in her hand.

"Indeed, dear?" she said.

She always called the Vicar "dear" when he was confidential with her and seemed to be leaning upon her affection for him, which was as real and true as if he had indeed been her father. Nothing of interest passed at the Vicarage, or hardly ever in their separate experiences, that they did not talk over together.

"Whom does the good news concern?" she asked.

"Yourself, my love, and some one whom you esteem very much."

"Tom?" she queried, a slight tremor in the tone of her voice.

"Tom!" repeated the Vicar, with a quick change of manner, from joy to sadness. "No, not Tom; Lord Cleeve! Now, don't you think he is the best gentleman you know?"

"I admire and respect him very much—almost as much as I do you," she answered, with a great sense of relief for the moment.

"As much as you admire and respect me! But we are quite different. I'm an old fogey, he's a young fellow; quite young; don't you consider him young?"

The Vicar detected, as he thought, a smiling negative to his suggestion of Cleeve's youthfulness.

"Oh, yes, he's young for his age," said Susannah.

"That's what I say; very young for his age. And what is his age? Forty; not a day more, and looks ten years less, in manner, alertness, appearance. Why, bless me, compared with some men I know, he's a mere boy," said the Vicar, growing enthusiastic and allowing himself a certain poetic and friendly licence in speaking of his friend, the son of a father of whose companionship he had been proud; "a mere boy, my love, a mere boy!"

"In another ten years he'll be old enough to marry and settle down," said Susannah, becoming a little reckless in her emphasis of Cleeve's age.

"That's it," said the Vicar. "He thinks of marrying."

"Yes?" said Susannah, noting with some concern the triumphant way in which the Vicar looked at her, and remembering that he said he had good news for her.

"Now, don't you think any woman should be proud to be his wife?"

"Yes, indeed; he is worthy of the noblest woman in the world;" and this she said with an honest conviction of its truth.

"He is, my love; and I believe he has found that woman."

"Do I know her?"

"I'll show you her portrait," he answered, taking from his pocket a miniature which she tried to see. "No," he continued, replacing the picture and raising his now somewhat anxious ward to her feet, and leading her to a mirror. "She looks better there, with nature's fresh glowing colour upon her face."

At which moment Lord Cleeve and Lady Berwick

returned, her ladyship declaring that she was dying for a cup of tea.

"Do you mean me?" exclaimed Susannah, her loosely bound gleanings falling around her.

"What is the matter?" inquired Lady Berwick, coming forward; while Lord Cleeve remained by the door, uncertain whether to stay or to leave the room.

"Nothing is the matter," said the Vicar, "nothing is the matter; but I have told Susannah such good news that it has taken her aback. I suppose I was too precipitate; I should have waited."

Susannah stooped to pick up her wheat and hide her agitation.

"What news, may I ask?" said Lady Berwick, taking up a kind of protective attitude by the side of Susannah and helping her to regather her gleanings; at the same time whispering, "Don't give way, dear; I am with you."

"The best news that I have breathed for years. You are so good and kind, dear Lady Berwick, and so dear to us as a neighbour, that you will, I know, share my joy—our joy—my best loved friend. Lord Cleeve has proposed for my darling. Have we not reason to be happy?"

Lady Berwick felt as if for a moment her heart stood still; but she quickly recovered her self-possession.

"She must feel the compliment, even if——"

"Even if—?" repeated the Vicar; and Susannah, unable to control her emotion, burst into tears.

"Why, my darling," said the Vicar, drawing her tenderly to his side, "you must not yield to your feelings in this way. It is a great happiness, greater than you in your innocence ever hoped for, but not greater

than you deserve. Come, my dear, take your future husband's hand."

The Vicar, as he led the girl towards Lord Cleeve, who was greatly disturbed at the somewhat dramatic turn the affair had taken, remarked, almost with tears in his eyes, "Oh, Lady Berwick, it will be a happy moment for me when, to these young people, so dear to me, I repeat the sweet Service of Marriage."

Susannah could bear the situation no longer. She suddenly broke from the Vicar, and threw herself into Lady Berwick's arms, "Oh, Lady Berwick! Tell them! Tell them! I cannot!" she cried, trembling with emotion.

Lord Cleeve turned his pained and anxious face to the Vicar, who looked from one to the other with an expression of bewildered inquiry.

"What is this? What is there to tell?"

"I hardly know if I should speak before Lord Cleeve," said the Lady of Powyke.

His lordship made as if to leave the room.

"Oh, yes," said Susannah, "let him know the truth. How can he forgive me else? How can he ever forgive me? How can I forgive myself?"

"Forgive you, Miss Woodcote?" said Lord Cleeve.

"Oh, yes. It seems so dreadful that I should say No. But I cannot help it. Can I, Lady Berwick?"

"Sit down, dear, and don't be so disturbed," Lady Berwick replied, gently placing the girl in a chair against which she was partially leaning. "It is a matter to be proud of, not to weep over. Young love is the poet's theme; and even the Vicar was young once."

"Young love! What is all this, Lady Berwick?"

"The dear child is engaged already."

"Engaged without my leave, without my knowledge!"

"Oh, I knew it was wrong!" sobbed Susannah. "I knew it was wrong!"

"Forgive me—I will retire," interrupted Lord Cleeve, the picture of misery.

"No, Cleeve, no," said the Vicar, in an authoritative manner. "We have no secrets here, or at least should have none. Will you explain this matter, Lady Berwick, or shall my ward do so?"

"Speak for me, Lady Berwick, speak for me!" said the girl.

"You have no cause to be troubled, dear friend. She is engaged to one as dear to you as Lord Cleeve. They are matched in years and in tastes, and the secret was only kept because we thought her lover should have time to make his mark in the world before he claimed so beautiful a reward."

Having written his note, and thinking afternoon tea would be over instead of which it had not begun, Tom sauntered into the room, unseen by the Vicar, who, turning upon Lady Berwick, had demanded, "Who is the man?"

"You have really no cause to be angered," said Lady Berwick, with intrepid coolness; "he stands beside you—your own son!"

A dead silence followed Lady Berwick's defiant declaration. Tom, ignorant of everything that had happened, but smarting from the manner in which his father had ordered him to come to him, kicked the wheat that was lying on the floor, at the same time remarking, as if to himself, "What's all this damned litter?"

"Litter!" said the Vicar, finding in the remark a

momentary relief from the tension of recent disclosures, "Litter! You don't know the glad hands that gathered it, the dear hands that dropped it, the troubled hands that were picking it up! Oh, Tom, oh, Tom!"

Then, with a great effort to control his agitation, the Vicar turned to the others, saying, in a tone of appeal, "Dear friends, this is a greater trouble to me than you can guess. Pardon me, I must ask you to leave me with my son. Susannah will order tea in the drawing-room. I will come to you presently."

CHAPTER XIX.

LADY BERWICK AS FRIEND AND COMFORTER.

WHEN the Vicar joined them presently, he found Lady Berwick, Lord Cleeve, and Susannah bravely awaiting his coming. Lord Cleeve had accepted the position with singular tact and good feeling. He had begged Susannah and Lady Berwick, so far as he was concerned, to dismiss from their minds all consideration for him, his interests, or his feelings. Nothing that could happen would change his sincere regard for Miss Woodcote. He was not altogether sorry that he had been indiscreet enough to indulge in warmer sentiments and to have expressed them, since it had relieved Miss Woodcote of a secret that must have been something of a burden to her and a shadow on her relationship with her guardian.

Lady Berwick affected to take a light and airy view of the Vicar's disappointment, and endeavoured to console Lord Cleeve with some of her experiences. She agreed that rarely could three persons have been placed in a more difficult situation than they at that moment. Happily they were friends, happily they entertained feelings towards each other that were in no wise selfish ; and, furthermore, no one in the outside world need know what had occurred.

For that matter, Lord Cleeve said, he was quite indifferent, except in so far as Miss Woodcote's wishes were concerned. Encouraged by Lady Berwick, Susannah did her best to take part in the conversation, but

was very ill at ease and greatly disturbed. She was too generous to allow herself to detect in the suddenness of Tom's love-making, and Lady Berwick's furtherance of it into an engagement, anything in the shape of conspiracy or intrigue.

At the same time she had felt in her heart a stronger emotion of regret at her unfaithfulness to the Vicar than of love for Tom. Indeed, she did not know what love was. She had naturally taken an interest in Tom, had admired his manly ways, enjoyed riding with him, rejoiced in his successes in the cricket-field and on the river, but had no thought of him beyond a sisterly kind of affection, until Lady Berwick pleaded so hard for him and aroused in her a sentiment rather of pity than of love, or touched a chord of friendship deeper than she had felt before, emphasised by a belief in the wisdom and kindly guidance of Lady Berwick. A less generous girl, and one having a knowledge of Society, might have had her doubts about the sincerity of Lady Berwick, and been shrewd enough at least to have suspected the sincerity of her ladyship's friendship and the underlying tenderness of Lord Cleeve's attentions.

Susannah's distress had been augmented by Lord Cleeve's proposal, though at present she did not realise how much of disappointment on her own account there was in her sympathy with that of his lordship. To have made such a sacrifice, only to have his pride wounded, and through her! It was pitiable, in her estimation, that Lord Cleeve should have done her so great an honour with so humiliating a result. She would have done almost anything rather than have hurt the sensibilities of the Vicar's dearest friend, in whose society she had spent so many happy hours.

It might have been possible that the Vicar's declara-

tion of Lord Cleeve's feelings towards Susannah would have been received in a different manner if Susannah had known the truth of the betrayal of Lizzie Melford. She had spent hours with Mrs. Macfarlane, consoling and comforting her, but without the faintest suspicion of the relationship between the girl and the Vicar's son. David Macfarlane had been perfidious enough to drop unfriendly hints about Luke Fenton. The fact that Luke had disappeared the very day on which Lizzie went away was considered sufficient for most of the villagers to lay the blame of the girl's trouble upon the man who was known by all Comberton to be madly in love with her. Indeed, Susannah did not altogether understand the immediate and unhappy reason for Lizzie's disappearance. Mrs. Macfarlane was very vague in her explanations, and Lizzie's step-father had simply held forth against women who were above their station, the folly of giving girls high notions and a kind of education that unfitted them for useful work. At the same time he had, in his hard Scotch way, been down upon Luke Fenton, who had preferred book-learning to honest trade, always linking Luke's name with Lizzie's, so as to screen Tom Hussingtree from any thought or suggestion of suspicion. In this way, and by Tom's own cleverness, he had kept himself clear of the village talk and the least suspicion at the Vicarage.

Lord Cleeve knew Tom as a by no means desirable mate for Miss Woodcote. Partly in consequence of what Lady Berwick had said on that memorable day at Powyke House and partly by reason of sufficient time having elapsed for some outward sign to be made in the direction of her ladyship's forecast, he had resolved to risk his own happiness by a declaration of his love. If

Tom Hussingtree, he argued, was really a rival, everybody would surely have known it by this time. Susannah would have shown her preference for Tom's society. Tom would have boasted of his conquest, if not openly, at least by some sign or other of triumph. Moreover, if the garden scene that Lady Berwick had shown him had the special meaning she more than hinted at, the lovers would ere this have asked the consent and the blessing of the Vicar. When he came to think of it, what was there in Tom and Susannah walking together in Lady Berwick's grounds? Did they not ride together frequently? Had they not been more or less of companions all their young lives? And why did Lady Berwick desire so fervently to impress him with the possibility of their eventual union? Was it because she knew the Vicar would not approve of it? Or had she some ulterior motive? He would not confess to himself that Lady Berwick had an eye on the higher title and status of the Countess of Cleeve. Nor would he let himself believe that she had fathomed the secret of his love for Susannah, which, as he learnt afterwards from the Vicar, was anybody's secret but Susannah's; she, poor child, had never for a moment thought herself worthy of so much distinction, for, of all men who had ever visited at the Vicarage or to whom she had been introduced at any time, Lord Cleeve seemed to her the most finished gentleman, the most interesting, chivalrous and learned, without pluming himself upon his abilities, his knowledge, or his personal appearance. If these had been the days of chivalry, Lord Cleeve, in her estimation, would have been the noblest of the Knights of the Round Table, the quintessence of romance and chivalry.

The Vicar came back to his three dear friends with

an enforced self-possessed expression of countenance. It was easy to see that he had been greatly agitated.

"I feared you might have been too impatient or distressed to remain," he said, taking Susannah's face between his hands and kissing her on both cheeks. "My poor child, you have been greatly deceived."

Lady Berwick thought he looked at her with an expression of rebuke.

"Deceived?" she said. "By whom, my dear Vicar, by whom?"

"By my unhappy son. But we will say no more about it at present. The ways of God are mysterious as they are righteous, and it is for His creatures to bow before them meekly and without question. My son has committed a great wrong——"

"Nay, Hussingtree," said Lord Cleeve, "don't say that. I fear I have been both inconsiderate and——"

"You don't understand, Cleeve; you will do so, sooner or later. Meanwhile, let us not blame each other. It is not to Tom's love for my ward that I refer —for who could help loving her?—it is to other matters. At present I have no desire to say how unworthy I think my son of a good woman's trust. We must be patient. But above all, my dear Cleeve, you must not let what has happened interfere with our old friendship nor with your visits to the Vicarage. Susannah will still be free to conduct the social hospitalities of the Vicarage, whoever may be my guests. It would be a calamity indeed if any thoughtlessness on her part, or let us say predilection or favour in respect of my son, should estrange any of us. I am sure Lady Berwick, in sharing the confidence of my son and Susannah, only had their happiness in view, however gravely mistaken

she may have been, or however misinformed concerning my son's claims to any possible approval of mine in a suit he should never have thought of. He knew my views explicitly, and——"

"But we were to say no more about it at present, dear friend," interposed Lord Cleeve, "and you are adding to the embarrassment of Miss Woodcote. I think it were as well that we should part for the present. You may rely upon it I will not permit what has passed to influence my friendship for your ward; I am much to blame."

Susannah turned an appealing face to his lordship, and, with a dignity of bearing and manner that surprised them all, said, "Lord Cleeve, there is no one to blame, or at all events to be blamed. I feel deeply the honour you have conferred upon me. Though a prior engagement has not enabled me to entertain your most gracious proposal, it would be grievous if it should cause us, myself in particular, the loss of your neighbourly visits."

"I thank you sincerely, Miss Woodcote," said his lordship, with a tremor in his voice that he could not control.

"Who knows," remarked Lady Berwick, "that what has happened may not be for the best?"

"I pray God it may be so," said the Vicar, earnestly. "My son will leave England for some time. Not on account of the confession my ward and Lady Berwick had to make to us, Lord Cleeve, but for other reasons wholly different. You shall know all at some other time, when we are calmer, and more capable of judging him and ourselves in this unhappy business; and——"

"Tea has been placed in the drawing-room," said Rogers, standing in the doorway.

"Tea!" said the Vicar, with a pathetic glance at Susannah. "Why, then let us go into tea."

Lord Cleeve begged to be excused. The Vicar protested. His lordship wanted to go, and at the same time desired to remain. Something in Susannah's manner tugged at his heart-strings. Now that he knew she was out of his reach, he loved her all the more. While grateful to her for her support of the Vicar's desire that he should still continue his visits to the Vicarage, he resolved to put miles between him and the temptation of being unjust to his rival or embarrassing to Susannah. He would wait for the chance of a possible renewal of his proposals, but he would wait at a distance. Since Tom was to be exiled, he would not seek to remain and gain an undue advantage over him. Nevertheless he stayed to "Afternoon tea," now nigh bordering on the dinner hour. Lady Berwick asked Susannah's permission to play the part of hostess. Susannah readily accorded her ladyship full powers. Lady Berwick ventured to tell the servant that they would dispense with his services. "So much better to be alone," she said, as Rogers retired. No one disputed her dictum.

The party was as sadly cheerful as mourners after a funeral. Lady Berwick worked hard to dispel the gloom, and to a great extent succeeded. She was as gracious as she was charming. Having brought about all the mischief, she endeavoured to make it easy to the sufferers. It was a genuine effort, and she tried to believe that it was generous also. Her plan of campaign was prospering. It was not yet "Checkmate," but, encouraged by the rapid success of her opening moves, she was full of hope. There had been very anxious moments. These had passed. What the Vicar

regarded as the widow's sympathy for her suffering friends was a complacent self-love. She, nevertheless, almost cheated herself into the belief that she was the fairy god-mother of the party, the disinterested friend, the loving neighbour.

The Vicar felt the influence of her womanly sympathy, shown more in her manner and the tender expression of her face than in words.

"It will refresh you, Vicar; there is nothing like a cup of tea," she said; "there is magic in it. I declare Lord Cleeve already looks the better for it."

"Did I look ill, Lady Berwick?"

"No, not ill; but we have all had a bad quarter of an hour. Who makes this wonderful cake, Susannah?"

"The cook, dear Lady Berwick," said Susannah, her mind far away from cooks and cakes.

"I shall send my maid for the recipe," said her ladyship. "Your cook must be a North countrywoman. Did you ever have cakes in the North, Lord Cleeve?"

"Oh, yes," said his lordship, "and ale, too."

"Really! I thought their cakes always went with afternoon tea."

"Occasionally with ale," said his lordship. "An thou art virtuous, shall there be no more cakes and ale?"

"And ginger shall be kept hot i' the mouth," said the Vicar, with a forced smile. "We don't forget our Shakespeare, eh, Cleeve?"

"Oh, that's where it comes from," said her ladyship, refilling the Vicar's cup. "Cakes and ale, of course; but I was not thinking of Shakespeare. Lord Cleeve is much too learned for me."

"But, my dear Lady Berwick, it is not learned to

quote Shakespeare ; we are doing so unconsciously all day. Shakespeare is the English language.''

''But he could never have known anything about North country cakes,'' said her ladyship.

''My dear Lady Berwick, he knew everything.''

''Lady Berwick's carriage,'' said Rogers, once more breaking in upon the assumed sociability of the little company.

''Thank you,'' said her ladyship.

''And will you be good enough to ask James to saddle my horse,'' said Lord Cleeve.

A few minutes later the sun went down in a soft and loving embrace of the Vicarage, and with a flood of golden light upon the fields where Susannah had been gleaning so happily with the children an hour or two before. She and the Vicar, having said Good-bye to their two friends, still watched their departure from the Gothic porch, until Lord Cleeve had disappeared behind the hillside on the Western Road and the equipage of Lady Berwick had carried glints of sunshine in its silver trappings along the road that divided the sunk fence and the rows of wheat sheaves into the falling shadows of the Northern highway. Then, all being still, except for the melancholy cry of the corn-crake, the old man drew his arm tenderly around the young girl, and she fell upon his neck and wept.

CHAPTER XX.

"THERE'S NAE LUCK ABOUT THE HOUSE."

"I AM constrained to gie ye notice, Veecar."

"Constrained, are you?" the Vicar replied.

"It's an expression I've heard ye use frequently," said David, with a hard, determined look of defiance.

"Very well," the Vicar replied. "Go on."

"To gie ye notice wi' all respect," said David, "that I'll be quitting yer service."

"For another and a better, I hope," the Vicar replied.

"Anither, but not a better," said David.

"And why another that is not a better?"

"It's just a matter o' feelin', Veecar. Ye've turned Maister Tom out o' doors; I'm gangin' wi' him."

"Indeed! Is it my son's wish that you should do so?"

"At present he doesna' ken aught about my intention. I taught him to handle his first rein, I love him as if he were my ain, wi' all respect to yer reverence, and I cannot see him thrust out into the world wi'out tenderin' him my services."

"And supposing he does not accept your tender?"

"But he will. I need nae wages, if his allowance isna' ample. My wife can manage the farm better by hersel'; and Maister Tom needs a body servant, and I'm the ainly man for him."

"You are a faithful old fool, David."

"I will nae gainsay yer dictum, Veecar."

"And I will not thwart your good intentions, though I fear such devotion is out of date."

"Nae doot, nae doot," said David.

"Just as much out of date as both of us; what is called the world has been made anew since we were born into it. But you shall go and find that out for yourself, on certain conditions."

"I'm willin' to obey yer reverence, as far as in me lies."

"Master Tom sails for New York on the steamship Germanic, that leaves Liverpool on the 20th; you understand?"

"Pairfectly."

"He is provided with means. I have paid for his ticket, and will give you its number; he is otherwise provided with funds on arrival. My cousin, who has a cure of souls at Brooklyn—though I know not if that is the proper phrase out there—has instructions concerning him in case his help be needed."

"Yer kind heart couldna' risk his discomforture in a strange land;—if discomforture doesna' apply, I've misunderstood yer reverence."

"You have paid more attention to the preacher on Sundays than I thought, David."

"I've been jest ruminating over all the geenerous words I've heard ye utter, that I mightna' seem unappreciative at such a moment as this."

"And I said you were a fool, David."

"But ye said it as if ye didna' believe it; and I look over it, whateffer."

"Which is very kind of you, David. But to proceed. You shall go to Liverpool. I will write to the Germanic people at once, and you shall have a berth thereon, and I will provide you with funds; you shall

do your best to keep my misguided son in the right path. He will have introductions to good people, and there are many opportunities for a young man to make his way in a new land which do not offer in an old and settled one.''

''A land flowin' wi' milk and honey,'' said David, ''where a man is a man if he's willin' to toil, and the humblest may gather the fruit o' the soil, as the Psalmist hath it.''

''Some new psalmist, probably? An American singer, perhaps? I pray God that you and my son may justify the forecast.''

''Amen!'' said David, reverently.

''You shall give Tom to understand the circumstances of your presence on the Germanic; he is not to think that it is my seeking or choice.''

''I've heard ye say truth's a bright jewel, hold fast to it. I'll not deceive the young Maister, and I'll keep him in the right path if the Almighty gies me strength.''

''If you travel far afield and the treasury is empty, before he seeks aid from my cousin or elsewhere, you shall be his banker; but in that case, mind you provide no more funds than are necessary; no extravagance, and the purpose must be to keep the wolf from the door, while you, both being willing to toil, as you say, may gather the fruits of your labour.''

''It's for ye to command in a' that, Veecar,'' said David Macfarlane, who presently returned to the Homestead to pack up and say ''Good-bye'' to his wife.

Lizzie Melford's mother blamed David for the loss of her daughter and the disgrace of it. When David explained his mission, she despised him the more.

That his love for a scape-grace should excel his decent feeling for his niece and his respect for her honest name, made her glad to see him taking farewell of the Homestead, where she had once been happy and where he had hitherto been respected ; and so she told him. She was somewhat of a feather-brain, but she was deeply hurt in her pride and her affections at the undoing of her first and only child ; and while David was whistling in a cheerful fashion, "There's nae luck about the house," on the way to the railway station, Mrs. Macfarlane sat crying by her kitchen fire, until Miss Woodcote presently arrived to comfort and console her.

It never for a moment occurred to David Macfarlane that there was a certain appropriateness in the song he whistled to the situation in which he was playing a prominent part. There had been no luck for any one of the persons we are most concerned about from the moment that Lizzie Melford had disappeared. They judged the girl aright, however, who refused to entertain the dark suspicion of Lizzie's death, either by misadventure or suicide. In the smoking-room of the "Crown and Anchor" they had come to the conclusion that, whatever might be the reason for Lizzie's sudden departure from Comberton-cum-Besford she could be relied upon to stand by the letter she had left behind. She was too clever and too brave to play the coward's part of taking her own life. It was not unusual, they agreed, for a pretty girl to be deceived ; but they had known cases where a really clever woman had not only pulled through, but had married well long after, and been respected also ; besides, now that Luke was getting over that attack of the tramp on the Powyke road, he would no doubt do his duty, let alone acquaint Mrs. Macfarlane with the place of her

retreat. "Doan't you make any mistake," was the judgment of the smoking-room in the language of its chairman, "Lizzie Melford is no fool; she've got a head on her shoulders and a heart in her boosum as'll able her to do what she says, earn a good livin', and of which we'll be duly informed when the right and proper time do come."

Susannah had met David, who, after a very cautious and vague preamble, had told her where he was going and for what; and Susannah had sent by the uncouth little Scotchman a message of encouragement to Tom. "My love and all good wishes," she had phrased it; but it was calmly given, and David volunteered that he would write her a letter on arrival. It was a self-denying promise, seeing that the writing of a letter was at any time a tremendous undertaking for David. Mrs. Macfarlane, and Lizzie herself, had done all the necessary correspondence of the Homestead, and kept the accounts; and David had never been celebrated for his learning even among the humblest of his friends.

Mrs. Macfarlane did not weep the less for Susannah's consoling words. She dared not tell her why the Vicar's anger with his son was so uncompromising. His reverence had exacted a promise from her that his ward should be spared this painful knowledge. Susannah was thus left to believe that Tom's only offence was that he loved her. Lady Berwick kept this tiny lamp of love alight, fed by words of praise for Tom, and whenever any symptom of a rival illumination was apparent, damped it with hints of Lord Cleeve's prior attachments, his probable marriage, and his "little affairs" that were notorious in town; all diplomatic, if not malicious, inventions of the scheming widow, who remained as popular as ever at Comberton, always

"charming" in the Vicar's estimation, with only one dissentient opinion, that of Lord Cleeve, who, however, kept it to himself. He knew, so far as a man knows anything that he cannot prove and has no right to act upon without proof, that the engagement between Susannah and Tom was the outcome of a plot hatched by the widow, though for what reason he could not determine. He was as much in the dark as Susannah touching Tom's chief offence in the eyes of the Vicar, which was strange, seeing that it was known to Inspector Bradley and one of the Hospital nurses, and Luke was getting better every day. But it is no uncommon thing for neighbours and friends to be acquainted with every detail of some burning scandal, true or otherwise, while those most concerned remain in complete ignorance of it. Comberton loved the Vicar and his ward, and deeply respected Lord Cleeve, and to a man would, if necessary, have exercised every possible restraint of tongue and manner to spare them pain and anxiety. And so Luke continued in their estimation to be the betrayer of the runaway, Lizzie Melford.

CHAPTER XXI.

"AS GOOD AS A PLAY."

"HELLO, mate!" said an elderly-looking gentleman, in spectacles and with a slight stoop in his gait; "glad to see you."

"Mate!" exclaimed Tom. "You have the advantage of me."

"Shake hands," said the man, quietly. "I want you to know me. I'm Jim Renshaw; call me Banks."

"Oh, how do you do, Banks, old friend?" said Tom. "It is a pleasant surprise to see you." Then turning to a porter in attendance upon him, he said, "Bring my luggage to the hotel."

"Right, sir," said the porter, wheeling his truck towards the Great Western Hotel. Tom had just arrived in time for dinner.

Jim walked by his side, and Tom, having secured rooms, ordered dinner.

"In the coffee-room, sir?"

"No," answered Jim; "Mr. Hussingtree will dine in his private room; eh, Tom?"

"Certainly," said Tom, speaking in the interest of Jim's disguise; "then we can have a quiet chat—after all these years."

"Thank you, dear friend, thank you," said Jim, in the educated voice of a somewhat infirm old man.

After dinner, when the waiter had brought them a bottle of old port and received instructions that they were not to be disturbed, Jim locked the door, and

removing his disguise sat at his ease and sipped his wine.

"I got your telegram; it was devilish risky, though."

"Why?"

"I'm utterly busted, and there's a warrant out against me."

"Good heavens!"

"I may be arrested any minute. May be, mark you, and may be not. I've been in just as tight a place once before."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm booked for Montreal; safer for me to get that way to America."

"And your wife?"

"Oh, she's gone back to Haxell. I persuaded her. He loves the ground she walks on, and she knows it. But it doesn't prevent him having his knife into me; swears he has nothing to do with the business; I know better; she doesn't, but she will when I quit, and I think she'll keep things square."

"You're in a bigger hole than I am," said Tom.

"I'm a bigger scoundrel," said Jim, with a grim chuckle. "You're an idiot to link your fate with mine, Tom."

"You're the only fellow that knows me," said Tom, chuckling in his turn.

"From your letter I gather that your father now knows you as well as I do."

"When the blow was struck you were the first person I thought of."

"I should have been the last," said Jim.

"I wrote to you that very night, and waited for your answer."

"I wired that I'd meet any train you named."

"I named it, and looked out for you and was awfully disappointed."

"And yet when I spoke to you, you didn't know me; just like your beastly pride. Well, now tell us all about it."

"Oh, there's nothing much to tell. I gave you particulars of my engagement to Susannah, and how it was brought about."

"And I burnt your letter as you requested."

"Well, things were going on fairly until I met that beast, Luke Fenton, and had to lick him within an inch of his life."

"Yes?"

"I kept it from the governor; made out I had had a spill; but it seems Fenton, thinking he was dying, let the cat out of the bag, and Bradley, the Inspector of Police, went and told the Vicar the whole bag of tricks; and right upon that,—by God, it is wonderful how one thing followed up another,—right on that Lord Cleeve goes and proposes for Susannah. Lady Berwick happened to be about; the Vicar let it out in her presence; and then down came the bolt from the blue. Susannah burst out crying, said she couldn't accept Lord Cleeve, flung herself into Lady Berwick's arms, asked her to explain. My lady did explain, gave it them hot all around. Lord Cleeve sneaked off. Lady Berwick went with Susannah to her room, and made her pledge herself that she would not break her word. . . . Then the Vicar goes for me, tells me I must marry Lizzie Melford, vows nothing shall induce him to hand over Susannah and her fortune to me, declares he does not believe the girl loves me, as much as hints that I have deceived her, hoodwinked her, the deuce

knows what ; flings the memory of my mother at me, browbeats me, then cries, and for half a minute, by Jove, I felt like crying myself ; but what the devil was the good——''

''Well?'' said Jim, coolly noting the points of Tom's story and sipping his wine.

''I didn't give way an inch. 'Very well, then,' says the governor, 'you are no longer my son, and you will quit my house so soon as you can pack and decide upon the line of country you will take.' And then he goes to his safe and begins to give me an account, as he said, of the money in scrip my mother had left me, and which he was now prepared to hand over to me. I felt devilish guilty, and if I hadn't thought how calmly you would have taken the thing, I believe I should have bolted. The scrip was done up in a packet and sealed with my poor mother's seal ; it had contained fifteen hundred pounds of scrip, the interest of which had been regularly paid to me ; and this is how I had been able to get hold of it. I had had a duplicate key made to the safe, and when the poor old gov'nor unpacked the bonds, or thought he was unpacking the bonds, there was nothing but blank paper. . . . Well, I just simply confessed I had had the bonds. . . . 'You broke into my safe like a thief,' he said. . . . 'No,' I said, 'I had used his key,' and I reminded him that the bonds were my own. 'Yes, thank God for that,' he said. Then he asked me how I had spent the money, and a lot of other things, and wanted to know if I had given any of it to Lizzie Melford. . . . I said I had, because I thought that might comfort him a bit. Then he wanted to know where she was. I said I didn't know, nor do I, nor does anybody ; it's the cleanest bolt I've ever heard of. . . . The end of it all was that he gave

me twenty-four hours to clear out. . . . I elected to go to New York, where the Vicar has a relative in the Church, a relative on my mother's side; and I promised to turn over a new leaf. He will provide me with a letter of credit on New York; he has given me two hundred pounds meanwhile. . . . If I can honestly write to him that I am making myself worthy to be forgiven, I am to let him know; otherwise, he never desires to hear from me again. . . . I sail on the Germanic, for New York, on Wednesday."

"What about Miss Woodcote? Say Good-bye to her?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Forbidden."

"You left her some token?"

"I wrote her a few lines, that David Macfarlane, the Vicar's farmer, undertook to deliver."

"The step-father of the Melford girl?"

"Yes; my second father, I may say—devoted to me ever since I can remember."

"For which kindness you seduce his daughter?"

"That's an infernally unpleasant remark, Jim."

"I feel unpleasant."

"He's only her step-father, and cares a devilish deal more for me than for her or any one else."

"But you'll make him your step-father, too, in the end."

"Shall I?"

"Why not? She's the right sort. Where is she?"

"I tell you it is the cleanest bolt that ever was made."

"You don't know where she is?"

"Not the remotest idea."

"And Lady Berwick?"

"Not forbidden. It was from her I had the full, true, and particular account of the explosion at the Vicarage, just as I have related it to you; only not half as life-like. You should have heard the story as she gave it; it was as good as a play. You would have thought you heard the people speaking, and seen the expression on Lord Cleeve's face when he wanted to leave the room and the Vicar, poor old gov'nor, wouldn't let him, said they had no secrets, all friends together; and by Jove, I strolled into the room, don't you know, at the height of it, and kicked some straw that was lying about and asked what the damned litter was; and it turned out Susannah had been gleaning, and you should have heard the Vicar talk of the dear hands that had gathered it, and the rest. I felt a good deal of an ass, and I think I was deuced sorry, too."

"I dare say; we all have our good moments; only moments: couldn't count the seconds of them into a full minute. And at parting, what was Lady Berwick's attitude?"

"She made me promise to reform; I swore I would. She undertook to keep my little corner in Susannah's affections warm, desired me to write to her."

"We can make those letters useful; she's a brick. I suppose it's Cleeve she's after, eh?"

"I dare say."

"It can't be the Vicar?"

"The Vicar!" said Tom, scornfully.

"Seems a jolly good fellow; soft-hearted enough for anything."

"You think so?"

"Why, most fathers would have chucked you with-

out a cent ; some would have prosecuted you for breaking into that safe ; damme, I think I would !''

''Go on, Jim ! You'd have thought of your own follies, and forgiven me straight.''

''But I shouldn't have given you a Letter of Credit and two hundred quid. Well, you've been a good deal of a fool, Tom ; but there's method in your madness, and we'll stand by each other ; when we're tired, we'll part. You'll stand me fifty out of the two hundred ?''

''If you need it, certainly,''

''Never needed it more.''

''All right ; it's yours.''

''You must meet me in San Francisco. I'll write to you, to the Post-Office, New York, tell you where you'll find me, and when.''

''All right, old chap. And what are we going to do at San Francisco ?''

''Make our fortunes, or make tracks further West.''

''Victory or Westminster Abbey, eh ? That's the game for me.''

''They call it Victory or the Tombs, in New York. Good name for a prison, the Tombs ; full of character, the Yanks, and humour. I like the Yanks, and so will you. Was in the Tombs once ; bailed out in ten minutes ; you and I are too clever to get in and stay there.''

''You would make most fellows funk New York or San Francisco, Jim ; but I know you.''

''Do you ?''

''I think so.''

''Well, if am not like the virtuous Dick Turpin of the old transpontine drama, who boasts that he may be a thief but never told a lie, I have been square with you, Tom ; and I'm square now. You should cry quits with

me, and give me a wide berth ; I haven't the strength to be honest, nor, I fear, the luck to be a successful fraud."

"Oh, go on, Jim ! You've got the blues. Once fairly free of England, you'll be your old self again."

"Think so? If I had the clever brute who invented the submarine cablegram by the throat, I could strangle him."

"Not you," said Tom ; "your bark's worse than your bite."

"I hope it is ; for, damme, I do bark, don't I? Well, let's have another bottle, eh? and say *au revoir.* Let me rehabilitate Old Banks first."

Jim resumed his disguise. The waiter brought another bottle. An hour later Old Banks, with a stoop in his gait and something of a stagger, chaffed a policeman on the threshold of the shady tavern where he was staying for the night. Only what he called his devil's luck saved him from being run in. When a man has this devil's luck his Mephistophelian friend knows how to bide his time.

CHAPTER XXII.

BETWEEN THE ACTS.

TIME soon reconciles people to the inevitable.

The ripple on the smooth surface of life at Comberton-cum-Besford resulting from the Melford scandal had subsided. It was no longer in doubt that Luke Fenton had gone off with Lizzie Melford. He had certainly made inquiries as to her whereabouts. This was a blind, of course. Learning had taught him not only to brave his betters but to imitate the cunning of the serpent.

It was a good thing, perhaps, they argued at the "Crown and Anchor," that Lizzie Melford had no longer any one to mourn her misconduct. Her mother had died. Her step-father never cared for her. She was too much for him. Mrs. Macfarlane's death and the death of an old man-servant at the Vicarage were the chief events of the village since Lizzie left it and Tom Hussingtree and David Macfarlane had sailed for America.

Through the influence of Keziah, exercised by Lady Berwick, both Mrs. Macfarlane's place and that of David had been filled at the Homestead by a cousin and his wife from Aberdeen. These changes had enlarged the area of gossip at the "Crown and Anchor." It was said that the Vicar intended to take Macfarlane on again in his former position at the Vicarage, in place of the servant who had died, and that Macfarlane was expected back at Comberton any day. He had been heard from, and was returning alone. . . . The Vicar's

son had written but few letters during his travels. Village gossips had truthfully diagnosed the life of the Vicarage when it credited the Vicar and his ward with an increased serenity since Tom's departure. Tom had always made a deal of fuss and bother on his periodical sojourns at home, and there had continually been ugly rumours about his drinking and gaming at a certain questionable house at Wulstan, some of which must have reached the Vicar's ears from time to time. . . . The Homestead had become a far more desirable house of call after morning service on Sundays. Comberton neighbours, on the strength of their friendship with the late occupiers, had been proud to make the acquaintance of the new farmer. There was no longer any bickering there. The new couple lived happily together. Lizzie Melford was greatly missed, of course; but her place in the schools and the Church choir had been filled by another, an elder sister of Keziah, who had come from Aberdeen to live with the Macfarlane successors. . . . Luke Fenton had given more or less offence to Comberton by his efforts to rival his betters in learning, and nobody was surprised at his betrayal of Lizzie Melford, though they were unanimously astonished and aggrieved that she should have listened to such a false, designing knave. Inspector Bradley had ceased to make inquiries concerning the girl's whereabouts. Some of the villagers gave her up as dead; others were convinced she was alive and doing well, probably in the Colonies, where in the old days several Comberton men and women had made fortunes.

Soon after Tom's departure Lord Cleeve had made a tour of the East, and had not returned to England for nearly a year. He had taken leave of the Vicarage as cheerfully as he knew how; but with a very sad heart.

The Vicar had begged him to believe that Susannah felt more than a kindly interest in him, and that her pledge to his son would not hold. Lord Cleeve, however, knew how sacredly Susannah regarded a promise seriously given, and Lady Berwick had taken a very special opportunity to explain to him that the engagement between Tom and Susannah was made with all the formality of a betrothal. He therefore tried to dismiss from his thoughts all fond records of their long and pleasant intercourse. . . . It was only after a year had elapsed that, more by the invitation of Susannah than the Vicar, Lord Cleeve had been induced to spend a week at the dear old place. It had, nevertheless, been a week of purgatory in contemplation of the heaven he had missed. Susannah endeavoured to treat him as in the days before the harvest time when she had been gleaning with the children, but there was a constraint in her manner that shadowed Cleeve's visit. This had not prevented him from renewing it, encouraged by the Vicar, who urged him not to allow Susannah to grow accustomed to his absence. The Vicar had reason to believe that she entertained for him a friendship that, but for untoward circumstances, might have ripened into love ; and he hoped and believed that an opportunity would arise for a successful renewal of Lord Cleeve's proposal. While Lord Cleeve allowed himself to hope that this might be so, he scrupulously regarded Susannah as committed to an engagement that precluded a possible realisation of the happiness of which he had dreamed.

Lady Berwick, meanwhile, maintained her hold upon the Vicar's esteem and on the love of all Comberton and Powyke. She had been the solace of Mrs. Macfarlane during the poor woman's illness ; had kept

Dorcas in full working order. Her gardener had gone on winning prizes at the local Horticultural Show. She had never relaxed in one of her customary charities, but had discovered new opportunities of doing good. In town, as in the country, she continued to be as popular as she was wealthy. Her name was on the subscription lists of all the chief appeals to the benevolent. She took stalls at bazaars, rode a tricycle with a wheeling footman in attendance during the Park meets in the early morning, and appeared in her well-appointed landau in the afternoon greeted by all the "smart people." Her dinners, at what she called her little house in Grosvenor Square, which was a mansion, were among the events of Society. She gave receptions that were the most popular of the merry month of May, bringing together celebrated artists, actors, painters, and authors, as well as the leaders of the higher world; and she was the same bright, happy, genial, handsome woman, to whom everybody within her circle appeared to pay court. She had many admirers who periodically approached her with offers of their hands and hearts and fortunes, most of their hearts being as small as their fortunes, their hands made with an almost mechanical capacity of grip and grasp. But Lady Berwick had no intention of bartering her freedom nor any of her possessions without very tangible value, and even in the case of Lord Cleeve she would have made mental reservations in regard to personal liberty. . . . She held Lord Cleeve by the merest thread. It was strong enough, however, to take him now and then to Grosvenor Square, where he generally heard something about Tom Hussingtree. Lady Berwick always contrived to be in possession of some item of news of the "exile," as she persistently called the

Vicar's son. Lord Cleeve would not have done Tom an injury for the world. He was willing that the lad should have a fair chance "to make his way," as Lady Berwick suggested. If he had broken his neck or drifted into gaol, or had picked up a woman of the town and married her, he would have been sorry for the Vicar's sake. In his heart he believed Tom capable of anything from pitch-and-toss to speculative matrimony; and it entered his mind, in spite of himself, to quite expect that one of these days some untoward misfortune, physical, social, or criminal, would break the bondage of Susannah Woodcote. He ought to have known that Lady Berwick would have been the last to be the bearer of any intelligence that was not to Tom's credit; but Love blinds the most wide-awake. Lady Berwick knew the power of the mischievous little god well enough, and in the matter of news she was as inventive as the cleverest reporter that ever won his spurs on the Special Editions of an evening paper. . . . Once the Vicar had proposed to Lord Cleeve that Susannah should be made acquainted with the chief reason for Tom's banishment; but Cleeve thought such disclosures should not be made by him or the Vicar, the more so, as Inspector Bradley had hinted his belief that Lizzie Melford had gone away with Tom Hussingtree. He knew that she was not with Luke Fenton; he knew that Luke had not found her; he knew that on leaving Comberton she had gone straight to the Shrub Hill Junction; and thence by the midnight train to Paddington; all this he had proved to his entire satisfaction; he was a man of decision, and once his intelligence had approved a theory of its own he stuck to it, and never wavered, as more than one innocent-convicted prisoner knew to his cost.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW.

ONCE, during his wanderings in the metropolis, Luke Fenton had been on the girl's track. He had seen her face at a window in Chancery Lane. Among other brass-plates in the hall of the building was one indicating that "The School of Shorthand and Type-Writing" would be found on the third floor. This conveyed no meaning to Luke in connection with his search for Lizzie Melford. If it was Lizzie whom he saw, she was wearing a coquettish hat, and her face was very pale. He waited a long time to see if she came out. Then he went into the building and walked about its many floors and read its many signs and notices, and returned to the street to identify the storey where he had seen the face at the window ; but he neither saw the face again nor any person that looked like Lizzie Melford. . . . The next day, however, he thought he saw the face once more. It looked at him from the window of a four-wheeled cab. He ran for a spell, and tried to keep up with it. Then he hailed a hansom, and drove after it, as he thought, Luke said, the four-wheeler had "Midland Railway" painted on it, and his cabby at once suggested that it might be going to St. Pancras, the very reason why it would be rather going from than to St. Pancras ; but cabby thought he might as well drive to St. Pancras as anywhere else. The four-wheeler had luggage on the top, a new trunk and a bundle ; Luke believed the young woman had a baby

in her arms. Cabby made a longer journey of it than was necessary, and when Luke paid him all he asked, which absorbed the last shilling but one that he had in his pocket, he found that the express to Liverpool had just gone. The chances were considerably in favour of Lizzie not having taken it, seeing how soon Luke had followed her, as he thought ; but he made no reckoning of time and was a good deal bewildered by the traffic, and cabby's suggestion of St. Pancras had tallied with his fears. He found a sympathetic porter, who, seeing that he was troubled, was willing to give him any information in his power that might be useful or comforting.

"A lot of passengers, I expect?" said Luke.

"Lots," replied the porter.

"Going to America?"

"Most of 'em ; the Majestic sails in the morning."

"Did you notice a young woman?"

"Several."

"One in particular, with a baby?"

"Come to think of it, there was a young woman with a baby."

"Pretty?"

"Yes, you may say pretty."

"Nice spoken?"

"Very."

"Dark hair?"

"Yes, dark hair and a hat."

"Rather a dainty kind of hat?"

"Just so."

"With a feather,—a sort of stand-up feather, white?"

"Come to think of it, it was white, and it was a knowin' style of hat."

"Sort of girl that you couldn't pass in the street and not notice; and yet modest?"

"Oh, very."

"About twenty?"

"Just about."

"With an infant?"

"In arms; it cried, and she nuss'd it."

Luke paused. He hated that baby as much as Lord Cleeve disliked Tom Hussingtree; and yet he would not have strangled it, because Lizzie loved it.

"Notice any name on her luggage?"

"Can't say as I did."

"It was addressed?"

"Oh, yes, it was addressed, and I labelled it. Come to think, it was a hodd sort of name."

"Not Melford, of course; she'd use some other name."

"No, it worn't Melford. Come to think, it had a hess, or even two, in it."

"Hussingtree?" said Luke, quickly, a fluttering of hope in his mind that Tom had married her and she was going to join her husband.

"Hussing-what?"

"Hussingtree?" said Luke, his heart beating.

"Come to think, I believe that was the name."

"Young, dark hair, pretty, nice-spoken, dainty hat, a stand-up feather in it, a baby, and trunk marked for the Majestic, you said?"

"Yes, it was; and there was a label on it, 'Wanted,' which they puts on when it don't go into the hold, but is wanted in the cabin or state-room, as they calls it."

"Thank you," said Luke; and he divided with him his remaining shilling.

And the following is Luke's last letter to Inspector

Bradley; it is dated from Shoreditch and written on poor paper in faint ink, but the writer had gripped his pen firmly and had taken pains. It is the letter of a naturally clever but self-taught man, reminiscent of the Primrose League, the Salvation Army, and the Comberton Night School.

"Good-bye, Bradley. The Lord keep you. I know you don't believe much in the Lord. But you will one day. Mind, it isn't too late. Thank you for being kind to me. Kind as you know how. You're a policeman at heart, of course: it's your business. Take up your Cross, it's a better game than the truncheon. If things don't mend with me, or even if they do, I'm for the Army; the Cross and the sword. Both for England, home, and duty. When one has nothing left to live for, how can one die better than in the cause of Old England, her Empire, her honour, and her flag? If I had my way, I'd turn every Salvationist Army into British troops. You say Our Redeemer's teaching was different; but His Father, the Almighty God, the God of Isaac, Abraham, and Jacob, He had a military policy; He smote the enemy hip and thigh, from Dan even unto Beersheba. I've prayed, and in my dreams I've seen the sword as King Arthur saw it in the great lake, the handle next my hand. Lizzie Melford is now, I trust and believe, Mrs. Hussingtree; God bless and protect her, wherever she is; and whatever has happened to her, for good or ill,—I pray God it be good. But whatever it is, I have said Good-bye to her. Forever now she will only be to me a memory. Sound the loud timbrel o'er Egypt's dark sea! Did you ever hear of Redan Massey or David who slew Goliath? I make no doubt you'll think me a bit mad. Dare say you are right. We may not meet again, but with the

words of the All-Conqueror on my lips and a Martini at my shoulder, you'll hear of me where the fight is thickest and the need of valour strong. Good-bye.

"Your grateful Christian soldier and fellow Combertonian,

"LUKE FENTON."

"Mad as a hatter, my lord!" was Bradley's comment, Lord Cleeve having read the letter.

"Poor fellow!" said his lordship. "Evidently means to enlist. I would like to assist him. Find him out. Scotland Yard will help you; I will write to the Chief myself. It might be possible to lend him a hand with the commander of the regiment, whatever branch of the Service he may join."

"All right, my lord," said Bradley. "He won't be the first that's joined through a woman."

"Nor the last," said his lordship. "What do you make out of his statement in regard to the girl having become the wife of Mr. Hussingtree?"

"Only the man's fancy. It was his constant cry that if Mr. Hussingtree would make an honest woman of her, why there, he didn't mind. Tom Hussingtree is just as likely to have married her as your lordship, begging your lordship's pardon."

"The comparison is far-fetched, Bradley; but let that pass. You think young Hussingtree is not at all likely to have fulfilled Fenton's hopes?"

"Not he, my lord; that's not his game, I assure you."

"What has become of the girl?"

"Ah! There you have me," said Bradley; "a needle in a bottle of hay. If I was a thief or a mur-

derer flyin' from Justice, I'd make for London ; never was such a hidin'-place, and Scotland Yard ain't as clever as you'd think. I was only the other day countin' up about twenty London murders within the last ten years, two a year, that they've never had even a clue of, let alone a conviction."

"You go very straight for a conviction, the moment you have a clue, Bradley, don't you?"

"I believe you, my lord. Give me a clue, I always say, and I'll give you a prisoner ; give me a prisoner, and I'll give you a conviction."

"Yes," said Lord Cleeve, thoughtfully. "It is a matter of professional pride with you, Bradley, I suppose?"

"That's it, my lord ; we all has our little weaknesses."

"Some of us our great weaknesses, Bradley. It is fitting that pride should occasionally have a fall."

"No doubt," said Bradley, laughing. "You always has your little joke, my lord. But coming back to Luke Fenton, I'll do what your lordship wishes. Education and Lizzie Melford's turned his head. As Squire Dobbins, of the Comberton Bench, often says, 'Human nature's a queer thing,—a queer thing, and the petticoat's the red rag of the Universe.'"

"You would do better to study your Official Book of Instructions than listen to the addled-headed aphorisms of Squire Dobbins," said Lord Cleeve.

"If your lordship pleases," said Bradley, in the language of the Assize Courts.

"Good day, Bradley."

"Good day, my lord," said Bradley, considerably abashed. "I wonder what Old Dobbins has done. A queer chap, Lord Cleeve ; you never know when he's

joking or when he ain't; sarcastic, they says at the 'Crown and Anchor,' I calls it disappointed Love—that's what I calls it. But we shall see! Lady Berwick'll tame him, once he runs harness with her; and a damned good job, too, I say!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

LUKE FENTON IS "DOWN ON HIS LUCK."

At about the time when Bradley was telling Lord Cleeve the story of this last letter from Fenton, Luke and Lizzie Melford passed one another in the street without recognition. They were both on errands of business, that were destined to have important consequences for both of them. Lizzie, neatly dressed, but with an extra bit of colour in the decoration of her fashionable hat, was on her way to St. Martin's Chambers; and Luke was strolling leisurely, his hands in his pockets, towards that well-known recruiting station by the new wing of the National Gallery. He looked neither to the right nor to the left; neither did Lizzie Melford; what might have been the result, if they had, it is not worth while even to guess, much less predict. Many a woman has married from motives of pity; and Luke was quite worthy of her consideration. Though his boots were down at heel and he looked hungry, there was no expression of despondency in his bony face and deep-set eyes. His gait and manner might be said to be defiant rather than depressed. He glanced at the various placards that adorned the railing of the Portrait Gallery with the air of a patron. Having inspected the dress and figures of the various regiments that headed the terms of enlistment, he looked round and examined the faces of the recruiting sergeants.

"Morning," said the stout subaltern of a marching regiment.

"Morning," said Luke.

"A bit down on yer luck?"

"A bit," said Luke.

"Boots want mending."

"They do."

"Clothes thin for the time o' year."

"They are," said Luke.

"Had no breakfast?"

"Not a mouthful."

"What's yer trade?"

"Jack of many, master of none."

"Want to 'list, eh, my lad?"

"Yes."

"Come along of me," said the sergeant, laying his hand on Luke's shoulder. "I'll take care of yer."

"Stop a bit," said Luke. "I want to leave the country."

"Oh!" said the sergeant. "What have yer done?"

"How,—what have I done?"

"That makes you want to leave the country?"

"It's what I want to do that makes me desire to leave England."

"Don't understand," said the sergeant. "If the coppers are after you, why, I'm not so sure that I shall be any use to yer."

"The coppers?"

"The bobbies."

"Oh, the police," said Luke, smiling. "No, unless Inspector Bradley's been inquiring for me."

"Inspector Bradley?"

"A friend of mine down in the country."

"Oh, a friend?"

"Why? What are you driving at?"

"I'll be straight with yer, mate. I want to know if

you've committed a crime that makes yer want to quit the country?''

''Only the crime of being alive and worthless. I want to quit England to fight her enemies, and help the Queen and die for the flag, if need be.''

''A lunatic,'' remarked the sergeant to himself; ''but I've 'listed many a worse that did good service.''

''What's that?'' asked Luke.

''I was only about ter say that mine's the regiment for you. If you're smart, know anything of drill and are willing to work, I dessay you may soon join the colours. Come alonger me, and we'll talk about it.''

And as Luke ''comed-alonger'' the sergeant, Lizzie Melford knocked at a door on the third floor of St. Martin's Chambers, close by.

CHAPTER XXV.

LIZZIE MELFORD MAKES HER REAPPEARANCE.

"COME in," said Mr. Max Nettleship; and there entered his writing-room in St. Martin's Chambers, near the Garrick Theatre, the very person whom we know as Lizzie Melford. She now called herself Mary Bradford. Luke Fenton, by the way, was quite right when he thought he saw her face at the window in Chancery Lane; equally wrong when he fancied he detected it at a cab window; still further off the track when he gave her a seat in the Liverpool express. During his wanderings in search of her, he had been nearer to her more than once than on the day when he saw her in Chancery Lane; once in particular, he had passed her, almost touching her in the street; but London is a wilderness, a refuge, a sanctuary, and the traditional bottle of hay containing the lost needle.

"I am out to everybody," said Mr. Nettleship, "except to a lady from the Type-Writing Schools in Chancery Lane."

"I come from there," said the girl.

"Indeed! Pray take a seat."

She sat in the chair indicated, her back to the window, so that Mr. Nettleship had her in full view.

"Mrs. Waring sent you to me?"

"Yes, sir."

"You write shorthand, you transcribe on a type-writer?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long did it take you to learn?"

"A long time."

"You are not a Londoner?"

"No, sir."

"From the country?"

"Yes, sir."

"Perhaps you learned shorthand at school? They teach everything now, except the useful arts of domesticity."

"Yes," said the girl.

"Excuse me for asking so many questions; but you see I——"

"Mrs. Waring said you did not care to have a very rapid note taken?"

"No. I am not accustomed to dictate; but I've had a touch of writer's cramp."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Yes, it is a complaint that naturally excites sympathy. Have you been accustomed to write from dictation?"

"Not very much; but I can do it."

"I've no doubt. You see, I asked Mrs. Waring to send me a woman of mature age, a spinster, you know, a lady who might come here at all hours without exciting remark, and—well, I hardly know how to explain myself."

"Mrs. Waring said I should find you kind and considerate, and——"

"Mrs. Waring and I are old friends. She would be sure to give me a good character. The truth is I hate to have a man about me. I tried a male shorthand-writer. He made me feel self-conscious. I write novels, and sometimes there's a love-making scene, and I thought that a spinster, a spectacled elderly lady, you know, wouldn't mind. I had an old aunt

once to whom I used to confide my troubles in that way, and I thought if Mrs. Waring sent me a lady of that calibre, you know, a sort of old aunt, why, I should get along swimmingly, as they say ; but——"

"You think I am too young. I don't believe I am so young as you may imagine ; and I have been accustomed to look at my work merely as work ; I have made it my study, and it is my living."

"Yes, I understand that, my dear young lady. You see, I am a bachelor, old enough probably to be your father ; but still young enough for my friends to put a wrong construction upon your presence here—at all hours, mind you, in a bachelor's chambers. It is true I have a housekeeper, and she has a woman who comes in once a week to help her clean up and so on. You will excuse me for saying so, it is not in the way of compliment or otherwise, but you are very attractive in appearance, altogether too nice, I fear. Yes, really too nice for me to have here at my elbow, alone, you know ; there is no telling what might be said ; and I would not have you, or any other young lady, scandalised for the world."

"I'm very sorry," she said. "I have brought a type-writing machine ; the porter carried it up to the door ; it is outside."

"There you are again, you see. There's the porter. He knows everybody who comes and goes, and is as great a gossip as the *concierge* of a Paris flat ; and, really, I——"

"Do you think it matters what gossips say, if your conduct is correct?"

"If your life is above it, no," said the novelist. "But to be free from suspicion, one ought to give no cause for talk, eh, don't you think so?"

"There must be hundreds of girls employed in offices as shorthand clerks and type-writers," she said.

"In offices, yes; but this is not an office, my dear child. It is a bachelor's chamber," he said. He went to the door, and brought the box into the room. "Is this the type-writing machine?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you find it difficult to learn the use of it?"

"No, sir," said the girl, rising to unlock the case. She took out the machine and placed it on a small empty table.

"A wonderful machine, the type-writer," said Nettleship, reflectively; "that and the sewing-machine are the two most useful inventions of our time. Don't you think so? I tried to work a type-writer myself. Couldn't manage it. Yet I have struggled successfully with a bicycle. Do you ride?"

"Yes, sir. I live at Barnet, and ride in every day."

"Do you, now? Not afraid of the traffic?"

"I don't like it; and on wet days I am afraid of it."

"I should think so, indeed. Do you know I wish you were twenty years older."

"Yes?" she said, and smiled for the first time.

"I do, because I think we should get along, you know. I'm rather impatient sometimes; impatient with myself. Not, you know, with any one else. You see, the truth is in these days one often has to write what other people like, not what one likes oneself. Do you read novels?"

"Sometimes, sir."

"What kind of a novel do you like, now?"

"'David Copperfield.'"

"Yes? What else?"

"'The Romance of War.'"

"Dear me! Yes?"

"'Monte Cristo'."

"Ah, there's a book for you! There's a romance. You liked 'Monte Cristo'?"

"Very much."

"Then you are in favour of the romantic story, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Not the problem thing, as they call it. Not the gruel and gutter novel. Not the analytical, psychological, surgical essay, masquerading in chapters, the whited sepulchre of fiction?"

The girl made no reply. She turned a puzzled face to her inquirer.

"Not the sordid, morbidly realistic panorama of disease and death that some people call Ibsenish, and others Zolaesque."

"Oh, no. But I have read 'Ghosts,' and 'Nana.'"

"The deuce you have!"

"An American young lady at Mrs. Waring's lent me 'Nana;' another lent me 'Ghosts.'"

"Really! Well?"

"I did not like them."

"Why? I don't mean ethically or in regard to the question of taste, but artistically, as literature, let us say?"

"I thought they were too much like real life."

"Yes?"

"Too sad, too dreadful, too true!"

"Truth is a great matter in fiction; only masters should deal with it. They are masters, both Ibsen and Zola. But their imitators! Terrible, you know, terrible. And you thought both the novel and the tragedy

too true? By the way, do you live with your parents, may I ask?"

"Pray excuse me, sir," said the girl, rising from her seat; "if you really do not think I am suitable for the work you have to give, I had better return to Mrs. Waring and say so."

"Your rebuke is just, my dear young lady," Nettleship replied. "Pray be seated. I have asked you too many questions."

The girl sat down, and looked at him with an air of resignation.

"I bore you," he said; "I am sorry. But, you see, you interest me. I would like you to come here and see whether we get on; but I might have to kill several persons if you were annoyed. That would be a bother, eh? Don't you see what I mean?"

"No, sir, I do not. You may rely upon it, no one will annoy me. I have learnt how to accept rudeness, and even insult, in this great, civilised city; a girl has to learn that early, whether she lives in a city or a village."

"That's true, too true. Man is a monster. He tries to disguise it, but he's a monster. I'm but a rogue myself, a rogue in a mask; yet, like my old friend Lord Beaconsfield, I am on the side of the angels. The long and the short of it, if you care to come and run the risk of my having to kill half a dozen young Philistines, why, so be it, come—and good luck to you and to both of us!"

"I am not afraid, sir, of what any one may say of me, and I think, after all, women are treated very much as they deserve; as you respect yourself, so you are respected."

"Very well; take off your cloak. We will begin.

First I will tell my housekeeper that you will take your luncheon with her. You don't mind that, eh?"

"I did not think to take any luncheon here."

"But you won't mind, eh? Will you?"

"Thank you, no; I shall be very glad."

"That's all right," said Mr. Nettleship, disappearing; and returning almost the next moment with a buxom, rosy-looking woman, somewhere between forty and fifty, a large apron round her large waist, her grey hair gathered beneath a white cap, and with a face as genial as sunshine in June.

"This is the young lady, Miss—I beg your pardon, what name?"

"Mary Bradford," said the girl.

"I will tell you all about her later," said Nettleship; "meanwhile, she will take luncheon and tea with you, if you please, Mrs. Lightfoot."

"Oh, certainly, sir," said Mrs. Lightfoot (so named, Nettleship used to say, that everybody might make their little joke about being born with a heavy foot). "Luncheon at one, tea at four; them's my hours; if they suits the young lady, she's most welcome, I'm sure."

"I'm sure she is," said Nettleship.

Mrs. Lightfoot curtseyed herself out; and Nettleship, taking up a speaking-tube by his desk and having whistled for attention, said, "I'm out to everybody until one o'clock." And then turning to the young person, he said, "You've brought a notebook?"

"Yes, sir," the girl replied, producing it and seating herself facing the speaker.

Nettleship's friends said he employed a ghost. He was so utterly unlike his books that it was difficult to associate him with their authorship. He was a bright,

chatty, frivolous, light-hearted, optimistic, florid, blue-eyed bachelor of fifty. He looked forty; thought forty; rode wheel and horse with the go of forty; went into Society; always seemed to have lots of time on his hands; dressed everlastingly in the same fashion, cut-away black coat, white waistcoat, white neckerchief, tall hat, wore an eye-glass, grey trousers, and tanned gloves; spoke quickly and in short sentences, had a habit of saying "you know," in a deferential way; was always good for a guinea subscription to anything; was believed to have a snug little property on the Thames, and was the popular author of several strong novels, one powerful play, and half-a-dozen shilling shockers; revelled in melodramatic stories in which Vice fought Virtue hard and in the end got defeated in a big, strong, tragic way. There was plenty of ingenuity in his work, and occasional flashes of comedy; the result, however, was gloomy with the gloom which the steady reader of romance delights in, the gloom of Poe and Wells, of Haggard and the old *London Journal* in the famous days of Smith. A really great novelist was Smith, of "The Will and the Way" and "Woman and her Master;" at least so think the men of our day who were boys in his; but this has nothing to do with Mr. Nettleship. Smith was a Bohemian, constructed his fiction under alcoholic influence, like Lord Byron preferred gin, wrote while the "devil" waited for "copy;" but was a real good fellow at bottom, all men say who knew him. Nettleship wrote when the spirit moved him. He made it move him at least once a day for several hours; and was a real hard worker. It is the real hard worker who finds time for riding, biking, dining, and going to the theatres. Some of the more steady and serious men of the Parthenon Club, of

which Nettleship was a popular member, thought him a good deal of a buck, not to say a masher ; but Nettleship was a pattern of virtue, masquerading now and then in conversation as a wolf. Some men do that ; "rickety-rackety" boys in talk who never racketed, lady-killers who never, under any circumstances, "wink the other eye." Nettleship liked to make himself companionable and equal to the company he met, would play their game ; in conversation was wicked or cynical or devilish to command ; and went home, to St. Martin's Chambers, with an innocent smile, and jotted down an idea or two that had come to him during his wicked conversational masquerade, something in the way of dialogue, the talk that might suit a villain, the boasting that might suit a coward, and so on.

"Quite ready, eh? Very well," said Mr. Nettleship, "suppose I make a memorandum or two by way of finishing a chapter. Difficult to start right away. It was Dickens who likened his habit of beginning to that of the carrier pigeon. A kind of trial trip round and round, as if seeking the proper route ; then, presently, going off to its destination. Oh, by the way, I did not mean you to write that down. Doesn't matter. Thank you. Now."

"Yes, sir," said the girl.

"'He had made his dispositions with devilish skilfulness. It was a dark night. He was armed with his usual weapons : a sand-bag and a dagger. The sand-bag was in reality a club. It was heavy and supple. It made no noise. It was easily carried. You could double it up. When you struck a blow with it, there was only a dead, sullen thud. It made no rattle. The only rattle was in the throat of the victim. A blow

under the ear stunned, if it did not kill. Which it did, depended upon the amount of force put into the blow. Jaggers was a master in the use of the sand-bag. He made it with skill ; he wielded it with genius. It was only a strong canvas bag loaded with sand, a stiff, roller-looking thing. Jaggers, in his low vulgar way, called it a "bloomin' roley-poley puddin'." It was a murderous weapon. If the Thugs of India had known of it, they might have preferred it to their no less deadly scarf.' Now wait one moment, please."

"Yes, sir."

"Have you ever read 'Edwin Drood'?"

"No, sir."

"Well, do. There's a scarf in that. The choir-master used to wear it. There is no doubt he strangled Edwin Drood with it. Mr. Fildes told me so. Dickens himself told his son Charley that Edwin was strangled with it. Now, I have often wondered whether Dickens got that idea from Thuggee. I think he did. He had something of the quality of Shakespeare. He put Jonathan Wild and Jack Sheppard and the Mint business of Ainsworth through his intellectual crucible, and gave us 'Oliver Twist.' Shakespeare was more direct in his annexations ; but he made the stale old fables immortal in his new dresses, such dresses ! But there, we must get on. Do I speak too quickly for you?"

"A little."

"I will go more slowly. Do you know, I think we shall get along capitally. It is the first time I have not felt terribly embarrassed when I have been trying to dictate."

"I am very glad," she said.

"So am I. Now, let me see, where were we? Oh, I know."

He walked about the room ; looked at the ceiling, then at his boots, then at Lizzie ; then stroked his cheek, as Sir Henry Irving does in Louis the Eleventh, but not viciously ; yet there was something grim in the action ; it was as if he might be trying to put himself in the position of his villain, getting beneath the skin of the character, as he called it, being the very man, don't you know.

"Quite ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll try and be more deliberate."

"Thank you, sir."

"'Jaggers stood within the shadow of a doorway in State Street. Chicago was abed ; all but a stray pedestrian homeward-bound, and a villain bent on his prey. Ralph Norton had just left a convivial party of the Press Club, and was walking to the Grand Pacific Hotel. He knew little of the ways of Chicago. It was cold as well as dark. The electric lamps made the shadows thick. One of them had gone out. It was in this particular shadow that Jaggers was hiding. He knew that Norton carried his purse in his breast-pocket. They call it a pocket-book in America. In the Greenback days there was little else besides paper money ; so they carried it in their pocket-books. Jaggers had seen Norton use his pocket-book ; and Norton was rich, the proprietor of a London trade paper. He was on a tour through America. Just at the moment that Norton walked out of the electric light into its black shadow Jaggers darted out ; and at the same time a third person appeared on the scene.—*To be continued in our next.*'"

Mr. Nettleship gave a sigh of relief, and leaning back in his chair, looked at the shorthand-writer. She was

dotting her hieroglyphic i's and crossing her hieroglyphic t's.

"I make a point of finishing each week with a bang, you know."

She began to take a fresh note.

"No, thank you ; I have concluded that chapter. I had written the other part before you came. This, you see, is a serial story, goes on from week to week. There is a certain amount of art in bridging over the interest from one week to another. Some of my contemporary novelists, especially the mild ones, 'stylists and sich' as one may say, who write what they call studies, psychological investigations, analytical pieces of characterisation, excursions into sexual philosophy and hygienic science, and that kind of thing, you know—well, they are inclined to look down upon the 'To-be-continued-in-our-next' romance. They can't write it themselves ; so they look down upon it, object to that form of fiction altogether. Dickens and Thackeray wrote serial stories. Anthony Trollope wrote serial stories. Wilkie Collins, Charles Reade, and Louis Stevenson wrote serial stories. Besant, Black, Braddon, and Ouida write them. For my own part, I believe the necessity of making what dramatists call a 'curtain' every week helps the author to concentrate his plot and give it nerve. What do you think, my dear young lady?"

"I think you are quite right, Mr. Nettleship."

"Good girl, good girl," said Mr. Nettleship, rubbing his hands, his genial blue eyes lighting up with a smile that passed over his cheery face like a gleam of sunshine. "We shall get on famously, I'm sure of it. I think it must be near upon luncheon-time."

He looked at his watch. As he did so, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," he said; and Mrs. Lightfoot came in accordingly.

She had laid her apron aside. Her ample bosom was covered with a white cross-over. She had put on her best cap and her best face.

"If the young lady is ready," she said, "the luncheon is also, by your leave, sir."

"Thank you, Mrs. Lightfoot, and the young lady is at liberty."

"Thank you very much," said Lizzie, rising from her seat.

"This way, my dear," said Mrs. Lightfoot, opening the door and holding it while Lizzie passed out, with a "Thank you, you are very kind, Mrs. Lightfoot."

Mr. Nettleship stood at "Attention," like a drill-sergeant, bowed to the door as it was shut, and said to himself, "A very sweet young creature, very!"

Then, drawing on his gloves, he took his hat from a mahogany cupboard which contained other hats, besides overcoats and sticks. He put his hat jauntily upon his head, looked at as much of himself as he could see in the mirror over the mantel that was encumbered with cards of invitation to public and private dinners, Art and social functions, and Private Views of pictures. Then, turning to the door, he remarked with unusual seriousness, "Yes, indeed; a very sweet girl—*To be continued in our next*,"—and sallied forth to the famous Parthenon Club.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DAVID MACFARLANE TELLS THE STORY OF HIS OWN AND TOM HUSSINGTREE'S ADVENTURES.

It was Autumn again at the Vicarage. But Winter was hovering near. The corn had been stacked, the stubbles shot over; the trees were shedding their last leaves.

A bright fire crackled and sparkled on the hearth of the Vicar's own room. The sun had gone down; the fire burnt all the more cheerfully, as if it might be trying to console and comfort the two old men who sat within its glowing influence.

"This is a sad meeting, Macfarlane," said the Vicar, contemplating the shrivelled hard little Scotchman, whose hair was as grizzled as the stubbly beard he had grown during his travels.

"Aye, 'tis," Macfarlane replied.

"Little else but sorrow on both sides."

"Nothing else."

"You had the letter from your sister Keziah?"

"The black-edged one, yes. I ken that auld John, who served ye sae weel, is dead. Also my wife. It might have been worse. She died in the fear o' God, and made a will in favour o' Lizzie. Weel, I canna' complain. I've often listened to ye i' the kirk, an' ye've said we've nae right to think too much aboot the dead; oor beezness lies wi' the livin'. Is yonder puir runaway dead, Lizzie Melford?"

"I hope not. We think not; but have found no trace of her."

"It's a pity. How's she to inherit her mither's little fortune, if she canna' be found?"

"That we must leave to time."

"'Tis so, I reckon. Ah, weel, her mither's gone for sure, dead and buried. God help us a' that have got to gae!"

"Amen to that," said the Vicar. "And where do you think my son is?"

"Nae, I canna' tell ye. I 'a'e lost him."

"What has he to live on?"

"I dinna' ken.—There's my account."

Macfarlane dragged from his breast-pocket a paper, which he handed to the Vicar with somewhat of a defiant air.

"What account?"

"The money ye entrusted to me."

"One hundred and twenty-four pounds," said the Vicar, glancing at the document.

"Three shillin's and saxpence half-penny," said Macfarlane. "It's writ down fair and straight."

"But I gave and sent you in all four hundred pounds?"

"True, Veecar; verra true, verra true; but that's where the account closed, d'ye see? Maister Tom kept the account himsel' after that, if there was ony kept at a', at a'."

"I told you to deal with the money yourself as it might be needed, and in emergency."

"Aye; but when I got as far as ye see wi' the account, Maister Tom concluded to be his ain clerk."

"I told you that Master Tom would earn what money he required; but if he should fail or was in trouble, you were to help him."

"Aye, ye telt me; but ane night when I was asleep, he altered a' that."

"Altered it?"

"Aye. He concluded that it would be better for me to earn what money I required, an' he'd help us baith oot wi' the cash in emergency."

"Where was this?"

"At Boston, the hame o' the Pilgrim Fathers. That place was soon too hot for him.—He'd picked up what the de'il's children ca' a pal, whateffer!"

"Who was that?"

"Why, if ye may trust to what's written on a man's face, he was just a great villain. Ye might speer the de'il lookin' oot o' his een. He'd come frae the West, he said, and he and Maister Tom met at an hotel in New York, four weeks after we landed."

"Yes."

"Weel, it was the verra day after he'd picked up his pal that Maister Tom discharged me from yer Reverence's service, and the pal became everythin' to Maister Tom, and I was just naebody."

"And who was this person?"

"He was a veera bad lot, Veecar; they ca'd him Konkey Jim."

"Konkey Jim?" repeated the Veecar, inquiringly.

"That's what they ca'd him. He had a nose more prominent than usual, an' he was mighty fond o' whaskey."

"Well?"

"We went frae New York to Boston. Then back to New York. I dinna' ken how 'twas done; but Maister Tom earned money there, and Konkey Jim was fu' o' gowd an' more than effer fu' o' whaskey."

"Had he no other name, this man, no surname?"

"Not that I effer kenned," said Macfarlane. "Maister Tom ca'd him Jim, and had a mighty faith in him."

"Very well," said the Vicar. "Get on, Macfarlane, get on."

"I will, yer Reverence. There was trouble in New York; after sunshine, storm, as they say, and we made for 'Frisco."

"'Frisco?" repeated the Vicar, inquiringly.

"San Francisco it's ca'd by the children i' the schules; but when they grow up to drink and swear and gamble like their fathers, they just ca' it 'Frisco. Eh, sic' a awfu' place, Veecar! There ought to be to each livin' creature twa policemen and a minister o' the Gospel, to luke after his body and soul."

The Vicar walked about the room, impatiently.

"Before we started, Maister Tom and Konkey Jim found they hadna' suffeecient funds for a' three; but I wouldna' be left behind. It breaks my heart to think o' it. I had to sell the gowd chain o' my grandfather's watch, that had hung to the fobs o' the family these hunner years, to get mysel' a ticket. I'll nae see the auld seals again."

"Well, what took place in San Francisco?"

"Tuke place! Eh, but it's a pairfect pandemonicum, an' the whaskey's verra bad."

"But my son, my son?" exclaimed the Vicar.

"Ay, Veecar, I'd willingly spare ye,—I did my duty by him. I wrastled wi' him, but bad company is just a roarin' lion seekin' whom it may devour."

"Tell me the truth."

"Weel, the truth, if it must be telled, the truth is it wor' a' drinkin' an' gamblin' an' swearin'; an' Konkey Jim, he just oot-Heroded Herod, an' 'll come to his end wi' delirium, or worse. At first he was nae unlike

a gentleman born and breed, dressed weel an' spoke weel ; but the way in which he went doon an' doon, it was awfu' !''

Still the Vicar paced the room. Macfarlane had never had such an innings. He spoke now as one having authority. Hitherto, in the Vicar's service he had been something of a nonentity. He had had in the past two women to obey, his wife and step-daughter ; one master-in-chief, the Vicar ; and one little master, Tom. Now he stood alone, a travelled man, full of information, and he was not going to let the opportunity pass without making the most of his position,—a traveller, and with a message.

''Where did all this happen?''

''Happened i' the saloons, as they ca' them,—places a' smoke an' noise an' glare an' glitter, where miners and Chinamen an' ither childer o' the de'il congregate, to kill time an' one anither.''

''Chinamen?''

''Weel, perhaps not i' the same place ; but 'Frisco's on the borders o' China, an' it's deefficult to keep them oot. It was i' the gamblin' saloon that Maister Tom and Konkey Jim most frequented where Maister Tom got into a scrimmage, whateffer.''

''Yes?'' said the Vicar, sitting down by the fire.

''One o' the gamblers had the audaceety to say Maister Tom had cheated at poker.''

''Poker !''

''Aye, that's what they ca' the game, an' a gude name to ca' it by ; it's a game for the de'il's ain fireside. An' Maister Tom jumped up an' went for Mr. Keno Plug, who they ca'd the Boss, a man a' skin an' bone an' whaskey.''

''Where did he go for him?'' asked the Vicar, look-

ing into the fire, hardly caring to hear more, beginning now to desire a postponement of the end, which pointed to a catastrophe. The Vicar had not studied human nature sufficiently to understand the vanity of the story-teller, the delight of the globe-trotter in an exaltation of the knowledge of the traveller.

"Where did he gae for him!" exclaimed Macfarlane, warming to his theme. "Between the eyes! Mr. Keno Plug fell doon among the cocktails an' the whaskey, an' I believe ye might 'a'e heard his bones and the glass rattle half-way down the street. Eh, but Maister Tom can hit oot!"

As the Vicar rose from his chair, Macfarlane imitated the letting out of a strong man's fist as he went on describing the fight, which he seemed to see again, looking right through the Vicar at the opposite wall.

"He's a powerfu' young feller, a braw young man. The minute he jumped up, he squared himself to the foe and hit oot; he hadna' been to Oxford for naethin', Maister Tom. Ye'd nae have failed yersel', beggin' yer pardon, to admire him at that moment, if ye could ha'e seen him stand up for the honner o' Bonnie Scotland,—I mean Auld England, whateffer."

Macfarlane was squaring at the wall on the other side of the Vicar, and poor Mr. Hussingtree began to think that his old servant had been fortifying himself at the "Crown and Anchor" or in the housekeeper's pantry.

"Spare further comment, Macfarlane," he said, "and tell me what happened and the end of it."

"Weel, in a minute there wor mair knives and pistols aboot than there wor' hands i' the saloon. As for mysel', I retreated to a place o' safety aboot twa miles off, whateffer, for I had nae arms of offence, knives or pistols, and I was affeared. The next

mornin' I learned that a man was killed, and they said it was Maister Tom——"

"Dead!" exclaimed the Vicar.

"Nae, nae; they laid the blame on Maister Tom."

The Vicar gave a sigh of relief.

"But it was nae true; he'd used neffer a pistol nor neffer a knife, and the man that was shot, it was just a mere accident. Ye see, Veecar, when they have a scrimmage o' that kind, they just shoot free and easy, and whoop and blaze away, and the glass flies, and the noise would do justice to the battle o' Bannockburn, if one had seen it, — the bluster and squirm and the banging withgot out the blood and destruction, — though the man that killed was just riddled wi' bullets and spent bottles."

"Very well; I am listening," said the Vicar.

"Ye're verra gude, Veecar. I'm tellin' ye a matter o' months in just a few words; I'll nae detain yer Reverence long. They said the sheriff was after Maister Tom, the Boss swearin' as he had killed the man that was riddled wi' bullets and bottles; so he and Konkey Jim made for New York. They disguised themsels; I wouldna' kenned who they were if they hadna' telt me. Maister Tom ordered me to remain and meander aboot, so that it might be thought they were still i' the place; and I misled the Boss i' this respect, and so enabled Maister Tom and his friend to get clear away wi'out mishap; but I was left, alas, wi' ainly a matter o' a few dollars, to travel as best I could. I had nae mair siller whateffer than enough to get to the first place the train stopped at—a matter o' sixty miles; they reckon a hunner miles oot yonder nae mair than five i' Comberton."

"I'm listening," said the Vicar, in response to Macfarlane's pause for a new departure in his reve-

lations that concerned himself more than Master Tom.

"Ye are verra gude, Veecar. I thank ye, but I feel ye'd just like to ken the truth, and naethin' but the truth, whateffer !"

"What did you do next?" the Vicar asked, the knowledge that Tom had escaped from the police at San Francisco inclining him to be more tolerant towards Macfarlane and his story, and even interested, now that it seemed as if he was about to follow the tragedy of it with a glimpse of comedy, for Macfarlane's face had lighted up with a smile.

"Hoo' did I get to New York wi'oot money? Weel, Veecar, I was just verra canny. Travellers are put to awfu' curious shifts. I tuke a tacket to the first place the train stopped at ; and there I foun' a man that fed the stoves. He was a Scotchman, and belonged to the ancient and noble Order o' Odd-Fellows ; and while the engine was takkin' in watter, I just made my friend that fu' o' whaskey he was nae fit to be trusted wi' the fires. Then I offered mysel' to do his work."

"That was very wrong, Macfarlane," said the Vicar.

"Nae sae wrang as ye may think. He was a countryman, an' bein' an Odd-Fellow, my brither ; an' winna a body be gettin' help frae his relations? Besides, ye ken, it was for a gude purpose. It was o' the last importance I should get me back to New York. I'd gi'en ye my word I wouldna' leave Maister Tom. And besides, my brither got work on a train, in anither car that was travellin' westward ; an' we pairted the best o' gude friends."

"And at New York?" said the Vicar, thus passing over Macfarlane's further adventures by the way.

"Again at New York, Maister Tom an' his drunken

friend had a tearin' time o' it, gettin' siller I dinna ken hoo', an' spendin' it the de'il kens where. When the worst came to the worst, and Konkey Jim had descended to what they ca' bunco-steerin', and was put into the Tombs for a month——"

Macfarlane looked at the Vicar, with a twinkle in his eyes, waiting to be cross-examined on "bunco-steering" and "the Tombs;" but the Vicar making no outward sign of curiosity, he continued his narrative.

"As a last resource, Maister Tom went to a friend o' the Reverend John Desborough, your Reverence's cousin, and telt him hoo' he'd repented o' his wackedness, and wished to return home like the Prodigal Son; and——"

"It may be so," said the Vicar, more to himself than in response to Macfarlane; "it may be so."

"It may, and God send it be!" said Macfarlane. "But I'm verra dootfu', Veecar. He came on board the ship they ca'd the Paris wi' me, but when we upped wi' the anchor and gat oot to sea, he was nae aboord; he'd just shipped me alone, a' by mysel'; whether it was done wilfu', I canna' say, or whether he was left by accident. And noo ye've got the entire story, Veecar, frae the beginnin'; and I beg pardon if I hae hurt your Reverence's feelings, or said tae much or tae little."

"Thank you for what you have done, Macfarlane, and I am sure it was all done for the best and in some respects was right, though I except your treatment of your fellow-countryman and brother."

"But the gude purpose, Veecar, the gude purpose," said Macfarlane, rather glorying in his cuteness than protesting against the questioning of his honesty.

"Very well, Macfarlane. I suppose it might be ascribed to what they call strategy in warfare."

"Just so, Veecar; and I thank ye for giving it a name whateffer."

"Good-night, Macfarlane. You will find that arrangements have been made for your return."

"The hoosekeeper was gude enough to tell me; and I humbly thank yer Reverence, and ye'll find me gratefu'."

"That's all right, Macfarlane. Good-night."

Macfarlane withdrew from the Vicar's presence to the housekeeper's room, where Lord Cleeve's coachman was being entertained, having during the afternoon driven his lordship from Cleeve for a short stay at the Vicarage.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"STILL HARPING ON MY DAUGHTER."

A KNOCK at the door, followed by the entrance of Lord Cleeve.

"I am very glad to see you, Cleeve," said the Vicar.

"I am not disturbing you?"

"You never disturb me."

"You are kind to say so."

"And just now you are more particularly welcome. I am troubled."

"I am sorry to hear it," said Cleeve.

"It is not a new trouble; but now and then it seems so. A chat with you will put it to rest, for a time at least."

"Macfarlane has returned?"

"Yes."

"Is the trouble in that direction?"

"Yes; but it is nothing that will mend by grieving over."

"I hope there is no cause for grief,—no fresh cause, I mean."

"Let us sit down and talk about something else; something that concerns neither of us and never can, eh?"

The Vicar shook Cleeve by the hand and took a seat near the table. Lord Cleeve sat upon a couch by the fire.

"Well, what shall it be, old friend; the ethics of finance, the depreciation of silver, pin-cushions, fiddle

varnish, the immorality of art, the Röntgen rays, young love, or what?''

The Vicar smiled as he followed Cleeve's suggested subjects for conversation until he spoke of young love, and then, assuming a serious expression of countenance, he said, ''Love is not a thing to jest about, Cleeve; whether for good or evil, it is a serious matter.''

''You are a splendid fellow, Hussingtree! Your heart is as young as your head is old. Well, young love shall be sacred; we'll leave out young love altogether.''

''No, Cleeve, dear friend, we will not leave it out; young love is the subject we will talk about.''

''Good. You shall begin. I will listen.''

''Then I beg you will listen attentively. You remember the sad day when I told Susannah of your generous offer?''

''I am never likely to forget it,'' said Cleeve, in a softened tone of voice and turning his face to the fire.

''I don't think I need ask you if your feelings have changed?''

''No; but from that day I have ceased to think of Miss Woodcote with the idea that she might ever be my wife. We have all kept our secret. Lady Berwick has been true to her word, I think, in that respect.''

''She is a charming woman, Cleeve, and I have never known her to be otherwise than perfectly honest and reliable, socially, as a friend, and in any matter of parochial or other business in which we have been associated.''

''Her silence and your son's absence have made it less difficult than I ever dared to hope for me to renew my visits to the Vicarage.''

''It would have been a disaster indeed to have been

cut off from our neighbourly intercourse ; it was hard enough to bear your absence for six months ; it is delightful to have you back again ; my sermons have improved every Sunday since your return."

"They have become shorter," said Cleeve.

"Ribald !" said the Vicar, smiling. "They have become more hopeful ; less spiritual ; more material ; I have preached the gospel of friendship and self-denial with increased faith."

"If that man Ingersoll, whom they call 'Godless Bob' in America, was orthodox, or had any creed at all that the Church could recognise, he might have preached your sermon of Sunday last in your own pulpit."

"In what way? How do you mean, Cleeve? Don't jest."

"His gospel is the gospel of friendship, honesty, well-ordered homes, family ties, patriotism, true love——"

"Stop there, Cleeve. It is of true love that I wish to speak, and you only seem to refer to it for the purpose of evading discussion."

"You said let us talk of anything and everything in which neither of us had any personal interest, some abstract theme, and——"

"Let us be serious, Cleeve. You say you have ceased to think of Susannah with any idea that she may ever become your wife?"

"Yes," said his lordship, once more turning to the fire ; for, talk as he would, his thoughts were continually dwelling upon Susannah, and if he had in honour ceased to do more than dream of the possibility of Fate some day being kind to him, she was, nevertheless, just as dear to him as ever.

"Then cease to think of her as pledged to another."

"It is my turn to say 'don't jest,'" Cleeve replied, looking up anxiously.

"I do not jest, Cleeve; nor would I wilfully deceive myself. My son can never marry Susannah Woodcote."

"She is solemnly engaged to him. It was almost a formal betrothal. Miss Woodcote is one who would keep her word if it broke her heart. I trust I am not a vain man; but I do firmly believe that her engagement to Tom is a sore trouble to her."

"It is a bitter humiliation to all of us."

"But she will stand by it; and, however foolish it may be on her part, I must respect her loyalty."

"Why, my dear Cleeve, it would be an outrage on love, a travesty on loyalty. She has made no vow to Heaven. To be true to your word argues that your word has been given in an honourable engagement, for a worthy purpose, a holy cause."

"If my own interests were not so bound up in an excuse for her to break her vow, I could support your special pleading; but——"

"Susannah does not know why Tom left England, and with what a stain upon his honour, what a blemish on his humanity. The mystery that surrounds his exile tells in his favour; it gives a touch of romance to it; she thinks it is all for her, and that she has done something towards giving to mere liking the sentiment of love. I could dispel all that in a moment. I often think it was my duty to do so long since; I have been largely influenced against such a course by Lady Berwick, and not a little by yourself, Cleeve."

"I would not, nor would you, Hussingtree, take unfair advantage of a man in his absence."

"Unfair advantage of an undutiful, wicked, dishonest, and fornicating son !——"

"Your only son," said Cleeve, interrupting the Vicar in his declamatory denunciation. "And your own teaching is one of forgiveness, self-denial, charity."

"And justice ! Don't forget justice, Cleeve," said the Vicar. "But you rebuke me righteously. God knows best. He has deemed it right to afflict me ; it may be for my good, for the good of us all ; we must not complain. But even as a clergyman I must say, Cleeve, that it is hard to bear ; and when I think of that poor girl of Melford's, I have to confess that the ways of Divine Providence are indeed mysterious. Poor child ! so pretty as she was, so intelligent, so kindly ; and to think that my son, of all other men in the world, should have brought about her ruin ! My God, Cleeve, I find it hard to preach forgiveness of such sins ! If we only knew what had become of her ; if we could only have helped her ; if his father could have done something to atone for such a villain ! God forgive me, I sometimes think I should never have taken holy orders !"

The Vicar mopped his face with his handkerchief, and paced the room, Cleeve following him with sympathetic support of friendly words, remonstrances against his taking the affair so much to heart, and little compliments on his manliness and the honesty of his priestly work.

"It will pass, Hussingtree, it will pass," said Cleeve. "Don't be so disturbed, dear friend. Lean your back against your philosophy and faith, your gospel of duty and obedience. As you say, God knows what is best for us ; leave it to Him, and let us hope for the best. I am not so keen a believer in Divine interposition as

you are; I have made no vows as you have; and yet I can't help thinking that it is not destined for so good a fellow as you to be unduly tried and brought low with sorrow and affliction. Be of good cheer. You have health,—aye, and wealth,—a great responsibility, but you use it as a trust; and you have Susannah. Be of good heart; you have much to be thankful for."

"God forgive me!" said the Vicar; "and not the least of His blessings is the gift of such a friendship as yours. I am ungrateful, but repentant; shake hands."

The two friends grasped hands; at which sentimental moment the dressing-bell was rung, and Cleeve remarked, "I did not know it was so late."

"Nor I," said the Vicar, looking at his watch.

"Half-past six," said Cleeve, looking at his.

It was difficult to get away from the painful subject they had been discussing; but the dressing-bell helped them.

"By the way," said the Vicar, "we shall have a lonely dinner. Susannah is at Wulstan. An 'afternoon' and a little supper at the Deanery. We did not expect you. All the greater the pleasure of your visit. I need not say that. It is a long drive; but she will be back by nine, at the latest."

"Rather a cold night," said Cleeve.

"It is; but Susannah knows how to take care of herself, and she has recently bought a fur cloak that might keep a body warm in the Arctic regions."

"I'm glad," said Cleeve. And all the time he was dressing, he pictured her being wrapped up by her Deanery friends and sitting for an hour afterwards in a corner of the old family carriage, her eyes challenging the stars for brightness. He was terribly in love, poor

Lord Cleeve ; and it was only by repressing all semblance or show of it that he was enabled now and then to be in the society of the woman he worshipped, and for whom no sacrifice tending to her happiness would be too great for him to undertake.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AFTER A LONELY DINNER.

It was indeed a lonely dinner, as the Vicar said it would be. Susannah's vacant chair was a depressing influence. More so, even, was the self-repression of the two men. Having only one subject they cared to talk about, they had both made up their minds not to mention it. And yet all other subjects fell flat. The telegraphic challenge of the hysterical young Emperor of Germany and the swift acceptance of it, at any other time would have aroused their enthusiasm. While the Vicar preached Peace, he knew that in the present condition of human and Imperial life there must be international and racial conflicts, and he was patriotic with all the instincts of the Church Militant. Lord Cleeve talked of the difficulties of the British farmer, and the onerous position of the landlord. But all the time he was wondering why the Vicar should have raised the question of Susannah's position in regard to Tom and himself with so much earnestness. They were both glad when the cheese, and the decanter of port that always came on with it at the Vicarage, were removed. The Vicar shortened the repast still further by ordering coffee in the library. Here they found Lord Cleeve's special box of cigars and the Vicar's pipe ready to their hands, and a tiny spirit-lamp, in the shape of a classic tripod, burning with a delicate flame that was reflected in the silver tray of liqueurs and glasses. If the Vicar lived a simple life, he had due regard to the

habits and customs of his guests ; and, after all, a little old brandy with your coffee helps digestion and clears the brain.

The Vicar quietly filled his pipe, which would have been a churchwarden of the old school of smokers if it had not been a mere imitation made in briarwood with a fine meerschaum bowl.

"What should we do without it?" he said, as he lighted a spill at the classic lamp.

"Without what?" Cleeve asked, as he pinched the end of his cigar with a gold cutter that hung at his watch-chain.

"Without what! Without tobacco, my friend ; the soothing weed, the inspirer of pleasant dreams, the antidote to sorrow, the comfort of the weary, the refreshment of the strong."

He blew a cloud, and watched it disperse around the tall lamp that shed a soft illumination over the centre of the room, leaving the rest in shadow, except where the candle sconces on the wall made their own splashes of light upon the sombre bookcase and relics ecclesiastical.

"And yet there are clergymen who condemn it as hotly as if James had only just fired off his puny pop-gun," said Cleeve, stretching his legs towards the fire.

"There are clergymen who ought to have been engaged in any other kind of calling in the Master's vineyard except in the cure of souls, Cleeve," the Vicar replied.

In another few minutes they would have been deep in theology, but for the timely interposition of a visitor, the announcement of whose name seemed to revive Cleeve's spirits.

"Superintendent Bradley," he said. "Dogberry, without his unconscious humour."

"It is rather late to be calling," remarked the Vicar.

"So I said to him," replied the servant; "he said he knew it was not early."

"A regular chop-logic," Cleeve remarked to the Vicar; "don't send him away."

"I said you had only just left the dining-room, and I did not think you would like to be disturbed; and that Lord Cleeve was with you."

"Yes?" the Vicar replied, seeing that Cleeve rather encouraged the servant to talk, an unusual thing with Cleeve. "And what did he say then, Rogers?"

"He said he had only just left his office, and that the world was not governed by Lord Cleeve; and I——"

"Yes, that will do," said the Vicar. "Let him come in."

"In a dogmatic mood," said Cleeve. "The mood suggests business. He has good news, or bad, for you, or has caught some poor mendicant red-handed at his nefarious work, and wants to know at what time you'll take the case in the morning; I'll join you on the bench, with your permission, and we'll let the beggar off and fine ourselves a sovereign in his interest."

"You don't like Bradley?"

"Not much."

"He means well."

"So does the clergyman who denounces wine and cigars, and gets drunk with the singing of hymns and denouncing sins he has no mind to; there are poor mortals to whom Nature has denied the capacity to either smoke or drink."

"Cleeve!" said the Vicar, his pipe in his hand, "what is the matter? One would think you had an

abnormal appetite for wine and cigars, and you are one of the most abstemious men I know."

"Superintendent Bradley," said the servant, ushering in the officer, who strode forward cap in hand, military gait, truculent manner, self-conscious smile, and all.

"Good-evening, your reverence," he said, raising his forefinger to his forehead, not with humility, but in an official manner, as a subordinate officer might to his superior; "good-evening, your lordship."

"Well, Bradley, and what has gone wrong?"

"Or right?" remarked Lord Cleeve.

Bradley looked from one to the other, inquiringly.

"You don't usually call at this hour," said the Vicar, encouragingly.

"No, your reverence; I generally manage to transact my business in a morning. But the fact is, your reverence and your lordship, Sergeant Thomas saw two persons hanging around the Vicarage grounds, one of them muffled up about the face, the other a hang-dog sort of cove, the Sergeant said. Now, I was coming over to watch them, when, calling at the "Angel," Mrs. Blake, who wanted to go to Lady Berwick's Dorcas meeting, couldn't go because her stableman was drunk and there was nobody to drive her; in that way I was detained, or I should have been here before. I was always a bit of a ladies' man, your reverence and your lordship. And virtue is its own reward, as they say. On the way home I took the foot-path across the Vicarage meadows, and there I caught sight of the two men, who slunk off behind the trees in the direction of Powyke."

"Powyke?" remarked Lord Cleeve. "Then it is Lady Berwick who should be warned."

"No," said Bradley; "they were only queering the scent. Powyke's not the cover they're making for."

"And what does all this point to?" asked the Vicar.

"Besides your being a ladies' man," added Cleeve.

"His lordship will have his little joke," Bradley replied, with a pitying and protesting smile; "never know'd his lordship when he wouldn't. What I wanted to know is if you have more money in the house than usual. Everybody knows your big safe and most people think you keep a good deal in it."

"You should tell them how strong it is, Bradley."

"There ain't any safe that can't be opened these days," said Bradley; "and the Sergeant says it is known that the Vicar has received a large sum of money to-day that would have been better in the bank."

"Indeed!" said the Vicar. "That is strange. It is quite true that I have received to-day in notes the proceeds of a little property at Wulstan, which my lawyer might have paid into the bank to my credit, but he preferred to bring the notes to me. It was after banking hours, he said, when he received them. Moreover, he is very punctilious as to accounts; knew I had a good safe, he said—and so I have, no doubt."

"I have recently had one by the same maker placed in the wall of my library; not as a protection against burglars, Bradley, but against fire."

"I know you've some wonderful curiosities at Cleeve House, your lordship," Bradley replied, in a conciliatory spirit.

"Bradley wants to know how much you really have in the safe, Vicar," said Cleeve.

"Thank you, my lord," said Bradley. "I do not desire to be inquisitive, but——"

"There is not less than a thousand pounds in the safe," said the Vicar.

"That looks bad," said Bradley.

"I think it looks good," said Cleeve, now standing with his back to the fire, and enjoying his cigar all the more for the turn the conversation had taken.

"Bad and good, your lordship," said Bradley.

"The Superintendent never commits himself—if he can help it," Cleeve remarked to the Vicar.

"I try not to," said Bradley. "It's good to have a thousand, it would be bad to be robbed of it."

"And do you think these two fellows you have seen are after my money?" asked the Vicar.

"It's a case of suspicion," Bradley replied.

"I really don't think any one would enter my house without an invitation," said the Vicar, rising from his chair.

"Except Lady Berwick," said Cleeve.

"I think I have the love of every person in the parish."

"These men may be utter strangers; one is, I'll be sworn," said Bradley.

"And the other?" inquired the Vicar.

"May love your money better than you," said Cleeve.

"Very true, my lord," said Bradley.

"Well, I have no fear," the Vicar replied. "But what do you wish me to do?"

"The most successful burglaries of late have been committed while the family have been at dinner," said Bradley.

"This family has dined," said Cleeve.

"If they had not been watched yonder, these two men might have taken advantage of the dinner hour;

they may have a better chance on another day," said Bradley.

"But it would take hours to break into that safe, surely?" remarked Cleeve.

"Might, and might not. There have been such things as getting duplicate keys, or servants being in the job; of course, that's out of the question here. Are these shutters always securely fastened? It is the one night that they happen to be left undone, by accident or neglect, that the crib is cracked, so to speak."

"Always, I believe," said the Vicar. "I know that when we go in to dinner they are open; that when we return they are closed and barred. Rogers fastens up, indeed, as soon as it is dusk."

"That's all right, your reverence. Give them an extra overhauling to-night. In the meantime, see to your other fastenings; keep lights burning—nothing like a light to intimidate burglars; let the dogs loose."

"Particularly old Sally," said Cleeve, laughing just a trifle sadly as he thought of the Vicar's reply to his confession of love for Susannah, "old Sally knows all about it already, I dare say."

"I'm sorry your lordship should think the affair a subject for laughter."

"I'm sorry that you are sorry, Bradley," Cleeve replied.

"It's a little out of our beat, but we'll keep an eye upon the roads to and from the Vicarage."

"Who's we, Bradley?"

"Well, me and Sergeant Thomas."

"Thank you," said Cleeve, willing to soften the asperities of the debate. Bradley could not help showing that he was angry.

"The truth is, your reverence, doors and shutters and windows are left too much to servants; the heads of households ought now and then to look to their own fastenings." And he cast a defiant glance at Lord Cleeve.

"Very well, Bradley," said the Vicar. "We'll begin at once; look at these shutters."

Bradley followed him to the window. The shutters were barred and bolted. A space was left at the top where on fine nights you could see the stars and sometimes the moon shining. There was a new moon on this occasion.

"The new moon through glass!" said Cleeve. "Why didn't you tell the Vicar there was a new moon, so that we might have gone to the door, looked at it, and turned our money?"

"I didn't know you were superstitious, my lord," said Bradley.

"A lovely moon," said the Vicar. "One can hardly imagine anything but good luck under such an ensign; but the world is full of trouble, and we must make the best of it, Bradley."

"Shall we load the guns, Vicar?" asked Cleeve.

"His lordship seems a bit cynical, as they say," Bradley remarked, as he proceeded to examine the shutters.

"Not cynical, Bradley; adventurous. I shouldn't mind having a shot at a burglar—only small shot, Bradley."

"Heaven forbid!" said the Vicar. "Well, Bradley, what do you make of the shutters?"

"The fastenings are all right," he replied; "but a good hand would be through those bits of board in five minutes."

"We must have armour-plated houses, Hussingtree," said Cleeve.

"My armour-plating is the affection of my flock," the Vicar replied. "I could rest happy in my bed with every door and window open."

"Not caring who caught cold?" said Cleeve.

"I mean unfastened, you quibbler."

"His lordship is so amusing," said Bradley.

"Well, since we have begun, Bradley, shall we examine the rest of our defences?"

"If you please, sir."

"Come along, then. I shall know more of locks, bolts, and bars in ten minutes than I ever knew in my life before."

"Good-night, my lord," said Bradley, with his customary military salute.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE FASCINATING PRIVILEGES OF WIDOWHOOD.

"THERE is a touch of vanity in the best of us," said Lord Cleeve to himself, as he lighted a fresh cigar and sat down on the comfortable old settle by the fire. "The dear old Vicar thinks he is so respected that even a burglar, if such a creature ever entered Comberton-cum-Besford, would spare him. I think it was Tom who advised him to have that safe built into his library wall. A curious corollary to his views of open house, by the way, that iron safe; but we are full of contradictions. . . . I wonder what my peculiar vanity is? A good-natured friend, I dare say, would tell me of a dozen vanities, and I suppose I should not acknowledge one of them."

The fire leaped up, as one of the logs, half-burnt, collapsed into the hot embers.

"The fire endorses that. Right you are, old log," he said, and took the poker to help its amalgamation with the embers. The sparks flew up the chimney like a swarm of golden bees.

"Is it not a piece of vanity," he continued, "that I still cherish the belief that Susannah Woodcote likes me better than she likes that young ruffian, Tom? It may be. But I am sure she does. Indeed, I believe she looks on her devotion to Tom as a tribute to my views on loyalty. Then, she would naturally fear that people should say she broke her faith with a poor young fellow to marry a rich man with a title. But I have more

sense than he has, am more intellectually endowed, and an intelligent young woman prefers a man of experience, one somewhat older than herself, and——eh? Well, wait a moment. I have been explaining to the fire, and to my friend, the poker, here, that I have no vanity; and proved it by proclaiming in words, and by inference, that I entertain half-a-score of vain conceits."

He laid down the poker, with which he had been punctuating his remarks in quiet strokes at the wood and coal.

"You lie there, my friend," he said, "and listen. Number One: I think Susannah loves me; although she has directly shown that she does not. Number Two: I think she is faithful to Tom Hussingtree out of respect to my views,—that is, to remain worthy in my sight. Number Three: that I have more brain-power generally than my rival. Number Four: that I am greatly valued by many for my wealth and title. Number Five: that even my extra years are an advantage in the eyes of a lovely girl. There, that will do; I find I am just as modest as other people."

He turned his head towards the window to listen. The sound of distant wheels broke in upon the silence. There was a passing reflection of lights above the window shutters, right in front of the new moon.

"Eh? What! Yes, it must be Susannah!"

He looked at his watch, and then at the clock on the mantel-shelf.

"Half-past nine," he said. "Yes, it must be Susannah."

He laid aside his cigar, pulled his waistcoat straight, stood up, and glanced at himself in the mirror where the Vicar on that memorable day had called Susannah's attention to her own blushing and agitated face. Then

the carriage stopped. Presently he heard Lady Berwick's voice in the passage from the hall.

"Lady Berwick!" he exclaimed. "Well, upon my life, that woman has the proverbial impudence of the devil himself. What can she want at this time of night? And when we are expecting Miss Woodcote, too! If she comes in here, I'll pretend to be asleep; not finding the Vicar, she'll go, perhaps, unless——"

"Don't take the trouble to announce me," he heard her say at the door, as he sank down upon the settle and pulled his handkerchief over his face.

"In here?" she asked.

"Beg pardon; yes, my lady," said the servant, opening the door.

"There is no one here," she said. "Never mind, Rogers; I can wait; they are still in the dining-room, I suppose?"

"No, my lady; but I will find the Vicar."

He closed the door. Her ladyship laid aside her cloak.

"No one here, indeed!" she said, in a low voice. "Why, here is the Vicar asleep, poor dear; his evening siesta. Dear me! Now, here's a chance. Fancy winning a pair of gloves from the Vicar! I will."

She took from a tiny gold case a card, and with a pencil that hung with a bunch of charms from a dainty chain at her bosom, she wrote, "'Sixes;" and then raised the handkerchief, to discover Lord Cleeve, his eyes wide open.

"Oh, it's you, is it!" she said, drawing back. "I didn't do it! mind; indeed, I didn't! I declare I mistook you for the Vicar. Oh! you've given me such a turn! . . . You are surprised to see me. You think me an odd woman to pay a visit at this time of

night. Not more surprised than I am to find Miss Woodcote not yet returned from Wulstan."

"Oh, it is not late," said Cleeve. "Miss Woodcote has gone to a party at the Deanery, and it is only half-past nine."

"You have been counting the hours ; she has not, it seems."

"I don't understand you, Lady Berwick."

"Never min ; don't. I like to be mysterious."

"We certainly do not judge you by ordinary rules."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You asked me if I did not think it strange you should call at this time of night."

"Oh, yes ; I forgot. Doesn't 'this time of night' sound odd, when we think it is little more than dinner-time in town, and the day, in fact, is only just beginning? Where is the Vicar, may I ask?"

"He has gone to look after his fastenings."

"His fastenings?"

"Yes. There are suspicious characters about."

"Meaning me?"

"You like to be mysterious, you say."

"The truth is, I knew you were here. I have been to a Dorcas meeting. There was a recitation ; that made us later than usual. I dine early for Dorcas meetings. The Vicar's housekeeper told me you and the Vicar were dining alone, and that Miss Woodcote was not expected home until quite late ; so I thought I might just catch you—not napping," she said, with her charming little laugh that was like a musical smile.

"Then you did not come to see the Vicar?"

"Oh, yes, after you," she said ; adding, "may I sit near you? I have some good news, and I could not

keep it to myself until to-morrow, even at the risk of incurring your displeasure at so late a call."

"Not my displeasure, Lady Berwick ; and this is not Cleeve House, it is the Vicarage."

"Ah, you need not remind me of that. Cleeve House is the most home-like mansion in the county ; the Vicarage is a cottage to Cleeve ; both lovely in their way ; but Cleeve ! Is your lordship aware that I have only once dined at Cleeve?"

"You remind me how seldom I am at Cleeve, and how little I have availed myself of the kindly feelings of my neighbours. But that was a very pleasant time you mention."

"You do not forget it?"

"Forget, Lady Berwick!"

"No, of course ; I did not mean that. You know how my foolish tongue will run along at times. If only Cleeve House had a mistress, what a delightful time we ladies of the county might have !"

"Yes," said Lord Cleeve. "Bachelorhood has many disadvantages."

"And few privileges," said her ladyship.

"But the good news?" said Cleeve. "From whence?"

"From America."

"From whom?"

"Poor Tom Hussingtree."

"Oh," said Cleeve, in a disappointed, ejaculatory way ; "indeed !"

"You surprise me, Lord Cleeve," said her ladyship, with a break in her usual purring and fondling manner. "I should have thought that a generous man, such as you, would have been delighted to hear anything good of your best friend's son, and even, let me say, of poor

Susannah's lover. You did not know of their engagement when you proposed for her, or you would never have confessed that you loved her."

"I suppose not. There are occasions when one is not quite master of oneself."

Lady Berwick had often hoped to find him in that helpless condition; but hitherto he had been proof against her wiles, and they were very fascinating, it must be owned; if the Vicar had been younger, he might have been caught had the widow fished for him; but her ambition did not lie in the direction of the Church.

"It is none the less a fact that Tom and Susannah are engaged, is it?"

"In the fulness of your charity, extend a little to me."

"With all my heart. No one knows better than I how generous you are, and what a broad view you take of duty and friendship."

"It is good of you to think you know me to be generous, Lady Berwick; but a truce to compliments."

"Well, I have had a most interesting letter from Tom Hussingtree. Here it is."

She held out a letter, that Lord Cleeve might take it and read it; but he made no response; so she put it back into some mysterious pocket or other, and detailed its alleged contents.

"He has been doing good work and making money," she said, "in California and New York, and hopes soon to return to England; says he means to call upon me in London, asks me to write by the first mail and tell him when I shall be in town; wants my advice about Susannah. What a power this love is in young

people! What devotion! How sweet it is to watch the budding, growth, and maturity of a pure sentiment in youthful hearts!"

"That is not how the Dorcas commentaries ran, Lady Berwick," said Cleeve, in a bantering tone of voice, that jarred upon the studied little outburst of the pretty *intrigante.*

"Cynic!" she exclaimed. "You are right, though. Dorcas was very pious in its reflections. It has no patience with what we call young love, and all that kind of business; it hates disparity of marital union; but, I assure you, it is very fond of widows."

And she laughed her merry, chromatic concatenation.

"But that may be selfishness, you know. They desire to please me; I am their Providence, as you may say; and some of them are widows, too; such widows! Lord, lord, it is wonderful what men will marry!"

"Dorcas must be an interesting study for a clever woman, who can compare it with Charity's 'Evenings at Home' in Shoreditch, and the Good Samaritan Rescue Societies of the West-End of town."

"All life is interesting; none more so than the seamy side of it, if your heart is not all hard and is content with merely satisfying a morbid curiosity. Have you ever done a course of what they call 'slumming' in town?"

"No."

"Not just a little bit? It was all the fashion a year or two ago."

"Not just a little bit."

"I'm sorry; and you would have been sorry. Really, Lord Cleeve, believe me or believe me not, the first

time in my life when I felt very glad that I am rich was on my first slumming expedition in the East-End.''

''Believe you? Why, of course I believe you, Lady Berwick. Charity is often a selfish impulse. Not in your case; I know that. It is so with me. A beggar in rags and with bare feet on a cold day, head low in bending humbleness, touches me to the quick. I hate to see people suffer; poverty makes me wretched, until I have relieved it. Selfishness, Lady Berwick, selfishness! One night I rebuked a poor wretch as I was leaving my club. I was in a hurry; his face haunted me. I went back half a mile to find the ruffian; not alone to relieve him, but to comfort myself; and I slept the better for it. Selfishness, my dear Lady Berwick!''

''You are in a strange mood to-night,'' she said. ''I don't know what to make of you.''

''Whatever it pleases you to make of me, Lady Berwick.''

She wished he would not address her as Lady Berwick so often.

''You jest,'' she said, dropping her eyes and her voice at the same time, with a pretty affectation of sentiment.

''Do I?'' he replied, looking at her. ''I wonder!''

She wondered too; but she was not there at the moment to push her fortunes with Lord Cleeve, except, at least, in a preliminary way. She had to get rid of Susannah; that mission was as yet unfulfilled; it was well on the way; it must be consummated before she opened siege upon Cleeve for herself alone.

''But really, Lord Cleeve,'' she said, suddenly, ''how is this business to be arranged?''

''What business?''

"The Vicar must give his consent to Susannah's marriage with Tom ; you must help me to arrange it. How is it to be done?"

"Do you know why Tom left England?"

"Because the Vicar drove him forth."

"Did he?"

"Did he not?"

"He did not tell us so on that day when he explained that his son would go abroad for a time."

"Tom told me so."

"Indeed."

"Tom came to say Good-bye to me, and told me all."

"All !"

"No; he did not exactly tell me all, but I guessed it."

"Yes?"

"Bradley knew it."

"The Superintendent?"

"Yes ; but he did not tell me. My maid, the best and cleverest servant a poor lonely widow ever had, was the girl's aunt."

"Lizzie Melford's aunt?"

"Yes."

"I knew that Tom led you to believe he was a martyr to his love for Miss Woodcote."

"He certainly said nothing of Lizzie Melford ; and why should he? A young designing minx. Why is it in cases of this kind that the man alone is blamed?"

"What can be said in defence of one who takes advantage of his position of distinction and privilege to seduce a girl and then cast her off?"

"Nothing, of course, my dear Lord Cleeve; nothing. But she ran away, and that village ne'er-do-weel, Luke Fenton, after her ; he was her lover, you know."

"Bradley told you?"

"Yes."

"Bradley promised not to mention Fenton's confession to anybody."

"Well, I am nobody, I suppose."

"I don't object to your knowing the truth, whatever it may be; and there is not much doubt about who the betrayer was. The Vicar knew, and desired his son to make the only honourable amends a man can make in such a case; he refused; the Vicar forbade him his house until such time as he might deem him worthy to come back."

"Even Macfarlane did not blame Tom."

"Nor would he, whatever Tom did. Macfarlane has the heart of an oyster, as cold and as flabby."

"Susannah, I believe, knows nothing of the scandal."

"Nothing, I understand."

"The Vicar preaches the duty of charity and forgiveness every Sunday."

"And repentance and reparation," said Cleeve.

"Tom has repented, I'll answer for him; and all young men have a few wild oats to sow. I remember a certain Oxford Undergraduate, before he came into the Peerage, who spent a merry vacation in London now and then, not to mention Paris and Monte Carlo."

"Nor does he forget a charming lady who received him at Grosvenor Square with special consideration, even though he was a mere commoner and not too well off,—nor the little dinners her hospitable husband gave both at home and at the Carlton."

"Ah, those were happy days, Lord Cleeve. You were Fred Leggett then; full of fun, the admired of all admirers."

"You had the same kindly fault then that you have

now, Lady Berwick ; you were always too complimentary.''

''You never come to Grosvenor Square now,'' she said, plaintively.

''Never ! I was there twice last season.''

''Twice !'' she said, with a little toss of her head. ''But that brings me to what I was going to say The Vicar must come to town, and bring Susannah.''

''He has not been to town for years. Doesn't like town. I don't think he has been in London a dozen times in all his long life.''

''The more reason why he should come now. Besides, does he never mean to take Susannah to London ? Is she always to be mewed up here, like a girl in a convent ?''

''Susannah only likes places the Vicar likes ; Bournemouth, Lynton, Penzance, and Lucerne. I think they comprise the Vicar's ideas of holiday and change.''

''The Vicar is a dear, good, fine fellow ; but it is a pity for Susannah's sake he is not a woman ; and can't you understand that the time may come when Susannah will revolt against this kind of narrow limitation of life ?''

''You want Hussingtree to go to London in the interest of Susannah ?''

''Yes.''

''I understand you. But suppose the Vicar should explain to Susannah the true reason why Tom went away from home ?''

''He will not, if you advise him not to do so. And why should he, if Tom comes back repentant and prosperous ?''

''The Prodigal Son—with a difference, eh ?''

''You will not take life seriously ; and yet it is time you did.''

"I am afraid you have no idea what funeral chimes are moaning under the jangle of the cap and bells with which your fancy adorns my unhappy head."

"Change them for a wedding peal—that is the pleasantest music in the world. But, hush! I hear the Vicar and Susannah; they are coming this way."

The Vicar was laughing heartily, and Susannah's voice was full of merriment. She was telling him something amusing that had occurred at Wulstan; so they both entered the room with happy radiant faces.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE VICAR ACCEPTS LADY BERWICK'S INVITATION TO TOWN.

"OH, how do you do?" said Susannah, in high spirits. "This is a delightful surprise. And Lord Cleeve! How are you both?"

"Very well indeed, my dear," Lady Berwick replied, kissing the flushed young face.

"Yes, thank you, I can say the same," Lord Cleeve answered, as Susannah looked towards him and put out her hand.

"I have not taken my gloves off yet, you see. The Vicar was in such a hurry to bring me in. He was waiting in the porch for me."

"My darling," said the Vicar, "I had just been saying Good-night to an official; I think I may say an officious neighbour without offence."

"I am going to town next week," said Lord Cleeve, "and thought I might take Comberton *en route*, the Vicar was so pressing."

"I am very glad," said Susannah, as a maid-servant stepped forward and took her cloak and hood, and left behind her the prettily clad figure of a fresh, young, unspoiled county girl, frank and free, without affectation, and equally without rouge.

"Sit down, my dear," said the Vicar.

"It is very late, I fear; but they were so pleasant at the Deanery, and would have me stay. The Dean read a poem by Lord Tennyson that has never been pub-

lished. The High Sheriff was present. He ventured to remark that if the clergy would only read the Lessons as well as the Dean read the poem, how much more enjoyable the Church Service would be; whereupon the Dean said, 'Don't you think we can read, Mr. High Sheriff?' 'Some of you,' said the Sheriff, quite boldly. And then the Dean's son, the young curate of Windersley, rose and said he thought if the High Sheriff would come to his patron's church he would hear the Service read properly. 'Give us an example, Dick,' said the Dean, in his quiet, natural, and familiar way; and the Reverend Dick stood forth and gave us a few verses from the Sermon on the Mount, and, do you know, the tears came into the High Sheriff's eyes, and he said he would in future attend at least one service a week at Windersley."

"And is that why you are so merry?" asked the Vicar, with a smile.

"Is it the joy of woe?" asked Lady Berwick, patting the girl's round arm. "One of my old pensioners at Powyke positively revels in the saddest chapters of the New Testament."

"That incident was early in the evening, Lady Berwick; nor was it exactly sad, because, you see, it may be said to have converted the High Sheriff. But what official have you had at the Vicarage?" she asked, turning to the Vicar.

"Only Bradley, the policeman," said the Vicar.

"Bradley?" she said, inquiringly.

"He says there are suspicious characters about, and called to tell us to see to our fastenings."

"Poor Bradley," said Susannah, "he is so fussy. He warned me the other day against helping tramps whom I met on the road; suspects Granny Metcalf of

having purloined, 'to her own uses,' to quote his silly words, two night-caps that have been missed from the stores of Dorcas."

Whereupon Cleeve laughed, and Lady Berwick remarked that Bradley "had soared above night-caps this time. I suppose he is afraid some one will steal you, my love."

"They would have a tiresome bargain, would they not, dear?" said Susannah to the Vicar.

"A very sweet one," the Vicar answered, with just the least passing glance at Cleeve.

"Well, now," said her ladyship, "I can see you are thinking of my poor horses out in the cold, and I do believe it is beginning to snow. Poor Lord Cleeve was asleep when I came in! But, really, those poor horses must stay and shiver under their cloths, which I hope my coachman has put on them, until you have made me a promise."

"What promise?" asked the Vicar, looking from Cleeve to Susannah.

"I don't know," Susannah answered, looking inquiringly at Lady Berwick.

"Lady Berwick wants the Vicar and you to pay her a visit in town."

"To be present at one of her ladyship's fashionable receptions?" said the Vicar, discouragingly.

"Not fashionable, Vicar. I am most unfashionable. You might even say I am a Radical in Vanity Fair."

"I hope not," the Vicar replied.

"And yet I don't think you would regret coming to one of my Evenings at Grosvenor House."

"We are plain people down here in Comberton-cum-Besford," said the Vicar, "and don't care to in-

terfere with our neighbour or hastily judge a class of Society with which we are unacquainted; but we have a clear idea of the company it is good for us to keep—or otherwise."

"Oh, my dear Vicar, what do you mean?"

"Nothing that should hurt your feelings, my dear Lady Berwick, nothing censorious in regard to what is called London Society, but——"

"Lord Cleeve has been telling you that I receive a somewhat mixed company now and then during the season in town, that he has met at my house actresses who are not in the Peerage and painters who are not R.A.'s; that among my very miscellaneous guests Ministers of State elbow struggling authors, that Sarah Bernhardt has met there a Royal Princess,—queens of Society, my dear Vicar, are not necessarily better women than queens of the Stage—or worse. Even the sacred plains of Heaven will see a very mixed crowd, if all one believes about Forgiveness of Sins be true."

"My dear Lady Berwick!" exclaimed the Vicar, with an amazed expression of countenance; "your defence of London verges on the profane."

"Forgive me, Vicar. You have always commended me for being outspoken."

"And generous, dear Lady Berwick,—and generous," he said, puzzled how to take her; "a woman with a great knowledge of the world, and we are such quiet, humble, untravelled folk down here! My dear friend, I judge people by my own knowledge of them, and my neighbours by their acts. You have been a Godsend and a blessing to Comberton and Powyke; other spheres, other methods; I can't believe that in any walk of life your feet do not tread the way good women walk. And so there, let us say no more about

London, which to Susannah and me is as mysterious a place as the Bagdad of fable."

"But, my dear Vicar, we will say more about it! Since you have so poor, I will not say so bad, an opinion of London, you ought, as a matter of duty, to come and see it in these newer days; everything is so changed since you were as young as Susannah,—is it not so, Lord Cleeve?"

"No doubt, no doubt," Cleeve answered.

"Besides, it is part of an education to know something of the capital of the Empire. If Londoners were patriotic, and loved their city as you love Comberton, it would be the finest and most beautiful you could ever see or read of; but Londoners are a sordid lot; there are fine and noble exceptions. Did you ever hear of Lord's?"

"The Cricket-ground?" said the Vicar, quickly. "Of course."

"Well, for the bribe of a slip of ground to enlarge their field and wicket, they permitted a freight line of a country railway to tunnel the place and break through the only garden-suburb of the capital; for a mess of pottage they sold to Greed and the cheap ambition of a railway speculator the healthiest lung of the great town, a suburb of country houses and country gardens, a land perfumed with lilacs and gay with laburnum in the Spring, dotted with tennis lawns in the Summer, and the scene of happy social meetings in the Winter, where the tall, ugly houses of the city streets were unknown, and where, with the Watkin Great Central Railway, they are now building tenement houses and flats, that might become Shoreditch, but are blots on the garden-suburb of the capital of the Empire."

"Bravo, Lady Berwick!" said Cleeve. "Well said,

and with fine point! I wish you could have appeared before that worldly Parliamentary Committee; not that you would have influenced them; they select Committees purposely to sit on subjects they know nothing of; it is thought that will make them impartial; not a single Londoner sat on the Committee that gave the North-West district of town over to the traders who bribed Lord's and who are dragging down a rural pleasance to the level of Camden Town."

"Thank you, Lord Cleeve," said Lady Berwick.

"And thank you," his lordship replied. "Whatever may be our differences on other subjects, we are agreed in our estimation of London."

"And its betrayers," said Lady Berwick; "though I don't know that we disagree much on other subjects."

"I feel sure you do not," said the Vicar. "But, listening to you, one can hardly help being conscious of one's ignorance of——"

"Many things that you ought to be acquainted with, Vicar," said her ladyship; "though, of course, you make up for it in your knowledge of the dead languages and the dead cities, and all that."

"And, I hope, I am not altogether ignorant of the living verities, Lady Berwick, and the calls of humanity."

"In Comberton," she said, smiling; "but London is also worth a thought."

"Of course it is," said the Vicar; "and there are, I believe, many devoted clergymen who labour night and day for its good."

"Come and meet some of them at Grosvenor House. They are not above associating with the artists and writers and even journalists who honour me by accepting my invitations."

"You press me hard, Lady Berwick. I will go—with Cleeve, if he will accompany us. There!"

"Thank you very much," said her ladyship. "Well, Lord Cleeve, I really must say Good-night; my horses will be suffering. You would like to go to London, Susannah, eh?"

"If the Vicar would care to take me."

"Ah, well, I see this is a little conspiracy; and I won't resist the plot. If Susannah is to be made the happier by a change of the kind you suggest, well there, we will come! The last time I was in town I had some rooms in Half Moon Street; it is a long time ago."

"But you will come and stay at Grosvenor House?"

"No, dear Lady Berwick, in that matter you must permit me to have my own way. Besides, you will very likely have a house-party. I like to be quiet and dislike disturbing others, do I not, dear?"

"Yes," said Susannah.

"I shall write to Half Moon Street."

"My house is at your service, Hussingtree. I shall stay at an hotel during my short visit to town. I am really on the wing, as you may say; I have no end of plans of travel to get through. I need not say how welcome you would be; and I am sure my servants would take care of you; you can, of course, take up your own, if you would care to."

"No, no, my dear Cleeve; we shall take rooms in Half Moon Street or thereabouts. I will get my lawyer to see to it for me; don't you trouble any more. We accept your invitation to an Evening at Grosvenor House, Lady Berwick."

"Spoken like the good, dear man you are," she said, taking the Vicar's hand. "And now, Good-

night to all of you ; and a Merry Christmas when it comes, and all kinds of other good wishes."

Susannah rang the bell ; a servant appeared on the moment.

"My carriage is at the door?"

"Yes, my lady,—has been there some time," said Rogers.

"Then Good-night again," she said, as she left the room, while the Vicar held the door open.

"What a dear, kind, remarkable woman it is!" he said, about to close it, when she returned.

"One moment, Vicar," she said. "You are not unknown in town, however little you may know of London. Your light has not been quite hidden under the bushel of Comberton ; they'll be wanting you to preach, so you must bring up some sermons."

"Really?" said the Vicar.

"Most certainly! Good-night! Susannah, dear, one moment."

Susannah followed Lady Berwick into the passage.

"Don't be startled, dear," said her ladyship in a whisper. "Good news ; a letter from Tom ; keep it to yourself. Good-night, my sweetest."

And her ladyship left the girl with a hurried kiss (some would have added, "the kiss of a Judas in petticoats ;" but Lady Berwick was not quite as bad as that) and the letter which she had offered to Lord Cleeve.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL.

"THAT'S an exceedingly good woman," said the Vicar, as Lady Berwick's carriage was heard rattling away through the Vicarage grounds; "a thoughtful, considerate, and a remarkable woman. Susannah, dear, ring for the tray; Cleeve and I will have our night-cap; he will smoke a cigar, I shall indulge in a pipe, and then we will go to bed."

As she rose to ring, the servant entered with a tray of spirit bottles, Cleeve's cigars, the Vicar's tobacco-box, and the classic lamp with its blue flame climbing towards the apex of its quaint tripod.

"A very considerate person," said the Vicar.

"What! Rogers?" remarked Cleeve, with a quiet laugh, desirous of changing the subject, for he did not think Lady Berwick the dear, good, considerate creature of the Vicar's estimation.

"Dear me, no!" said the Vicar. "Lady Berwick. Susannah, dear, do you mind giving us a little music, the old German song, eh?" And he repeated the first verse of the English translation.

Susannah sat down at the organ, and coaxed the delicious melody from key and stop, and modulated it from major to minor, and gave it sympathetic suggestions of new phraseology. The Vicar filled his pipe, Lord Cleeve lighted his cigar. Rogers made the grog, and then silently withdrew. A star still shone into the room through the glass at the top of the old-fashioned shutters; and Susannah for the moment put aside her

doubts and fears and hopes and speculations about the letter that Lady Berwick had so mysteriously placed in her hand.

"I like a night-cap, don't you, Cleeve?"

"Indeed I do, in pleasant company."

"Do they smoke at Grosvenor House?"

"I suppose they do. The ladies and gentlemen her ladyship spoke of smoke."

"The ladies?"

"Oh, yes. The cigarette is permitted in the highest society."

"You surprise me."

"It does seem rather strange, not to say disagreeable, in England to see a lady take up a cigarette after dinner and smoke with the men; but in Spain I think one likes it, and in Russia the ladies have their own smoking-rooms, as we have."

"It is a great thing to have seen the world," said the Vicar, leaning back in his chair and watching the smoke from his pipe. "Do you know what induced me to consent to go to town next season and spend an evening at Grosvenor House?"

"You felt that Susannah would like it, and Lady Berwick was so very pressing."

"Because you said you would go with us. It came into my mind that such a visit might make an opportunity for you to speak frankly to Susannah, and tell her what we feel, both of us, is for her happiness. I don't know why it occurred to me that there might be more opportunity in town than here in Comberton. Perhaps because you would not feel you were taking advantage of being in my house and having my approval, and so on. My dear friend, I would not ask you to come here notwithstanding our great and valued

friendship if I did not feel sure in my heart that Susannah loves you, and is for some unaccountable reason sacrificing herself, perhaps only for a mere idea or a whim—sacrificing herself and you."

"She knows all I would say if I dared."

"She loves you, Cleeve; and with her love there is that true esteem that sanctifies love and makes marriage a certain happiness."

"But her word, old friend! She will never break it; and you and I should be the last to say she is not right."

Susannah paused for a moment. They stopped talking. Then she passed from the old German song into one of Bach's fugues; and from a dreamy pathos of melody, half-disguised in harmonious impromptus, the music became defiant. The Vicar listened for a moment, and then, satisfied that they might still continue their conversation without Susannah hearing them, replied to Cleeve.

"It was a rash promise," he said; "it has not even the importance of a vow, and Heaven has cancelled many an oath less recklessly made than that same weak acceptance of an unrighteous proposal."

"Her moral sense is too highly wrought, I fear, to give way before such arguments."

"There must be two holy promises to the fulfilment of that vow, and only one is registered; for my son can never marry Susannah Woodcote. Don't you think it is a terrible thing for a father to know that his only son is unworthy of an honest love? But would it not be the height of dishonour if I permitted my ward, a sacred and holy trust, to be mated to such a man? Think of a girl so pure and good, so beautiful, being sacrificed because a promise has been filched from her."

"My dear Vicar, do you think Lady Berwick was unduly in their secret? I mean, does it ever occur to you that she may have exercised an influence favourable to Tom?"

"Sometimes such thoughts have crossed my mind; but then, you know, every woman is a match-maker. She was always very kind to Tom; and once upon a time the lad was a fine fellow, we all thought, an honest piece of young English manhood! But it does not bear thinking of!" he said, after a pause, and drew his handkerchief across his eyes and laid down his pipe.

Susannah struck a false chord, and stammered, if one may use the expression, into a series of discords, as if she were vainly trying to get back into the key she had wandered from; and then suddenly stopped.

"Why, my dear, what is it?" said the Vicar, rising from his seat.

"I think I am tired, dear, and my head aches a little."

"We will go to bed, my child; we are all rather tired; and you especially have had a very trying day. Besides, it is getting late. Good-night, my love."

He kissed her on both cheeks.

"Good-night, Lord Cleeve," she said.

His lordship took her hand with formal respect, and said, "Good-night, Miss Woodcote; sleep well."

Then he opened the door, and stood there after she had left the room, as if he listened to her footsteps and hesitated before shutting out the lightest sound of them and the rustle of her dress.

Presently, the Vicar and Cleeve having said "Good-night" to each other and left the room, Macfarlane entered, closed the door, and sat down in the Vicar's chair. He was the last of the household, as a rule, to

go to bed. It was his duty to clear the Vicar's table, see that the fires were raked out or banked up, as the case might be, and the house properly closed and secured for the night.

"The Veecar thinks whaskey hot is a man's best night-cap. On occasion, it's weel to tak' it unsopheesticated."

He filled a tumbler half-full of spirit, and sipped it gradually until the glass was empty. Then he took from his waistcoat pocket a small horn box, and inhaled a mighty pinch of snuff.

"I'll jest need all the fortifyin' artificial means may provide a man; it's an awfu' thing I'm gaein' to dae."

He went to the door and listened; opened it and listened; looked at the clock on the mantelpiece, and cast his eyes towards the window.

"It isna' reicht for the lad to starve; and he's the Veecar's heir an' his ain son—his ainly son; an' besides, there's scrip in the safe that belongs to him, he says,—his ain property, his verra ain; and if he could be sure of twa or three hundred pounds, he could return like the Prodigal Son, but weel dressed and prosperous, and, may be, marry Lady Berwick or Miss Woodcote, and have nae need to beg or borrow, or tek' violently what is his ain, and live happy ever after, as the sayin' is. Eh, but it's an awfu' risky thing to do. And a wacked thing whateffer! Aye, and a deev'lish thing."

Then he fumbled in his pockets and brought out a key, with which he quietly unlocked the safe.

Then opening the Vicar's writing desk, he took from his pocket a bunch of keys, the Vicar's library keys, mostly used for bookcases and cabinets, and opened a

secret drawer where the key of the safe was kept, and forthwith unlocked the iron chest; replacing the key, relocking the desk, and remarking to himself, "The Veecar will jist think he'd left them in the bureau," and there he placed them, hanging naturally enough from a key in the lock.

"It's weel understood the Veecar is careless, as Maister Tom truly observed. I reckon I'll get hanged for him before I've done. My legs are tremblin' under me, and my hand shakes as if I'd contracted the palsy."

He filled his glass again and inhaled more snuff, by which time the clock on the mantel began to strike the hour. He turned, with a start of anxiety.

"Eh, by the mighty powers. I'm that scared. I might have seen a warlock or hear'd the chuckle o' the de'il lyin' i' wait for me. Eleven o'clock! Eh, Veecar, but I'm jist a damned scoundrel! Ou ay', that's a fact! But it's for the rightfu' heir; he has need o' siller, an' he maun ha'e it this way, or he may be gettin' it wi' Konkey Jim at his elbow, in some mair awfu' fashion."

Thereupon Macfarlane turned down the tiny blue flame of the classic lamp, blew out the candles, unfastened the shutter-bar, unlatched the window, stole out of the room, and bolted the door behind him.

As he did so, the window-sash was quietly raised, the shutter thrust open, and a man entered and went straight to the safe. He turned the bull's-eye of a dark-lantern upon it, seized the handle, pulled open the door, and took out a couple of drawers.

While he was engaged in sorting the papers and filling his pockets with notes and a small quantity of loose gold, the door was unbolted from without, and Susan-

nah entered with a candle-lamp in her hand. She had dropped the letter Lady Berwick had given her, and had come to look for it, where she had sat, at the organ. She was well in the room before she saw the man engaged in front of the safe, the light partly on his face. She tried to cry out, but her voice failed her. She clung to the seat by the organ, and the candle dropped from her hand.

A man suddenly appeared at the open window, his dark shadow silhouetted against a starlit night. He had been keeping guard without. The man by the safe turned for a moment as the other appeared. Susannah saw his face.

"What is it?" he asked, in a hoarse whisper, buttoning his coat and shutting off the light.

"The house is alarmed; there's somebody in the room."

"Rot!" said the other.

"Come on, you fool," rejoined the man at the window.

At that moment the alarm-bell rang out, loud and long; and the two disappeared.

Susannah crept from her hiding-place, fled to her room, and burst into tears.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AN EVENTFUL NIGHT.

THE Vicar was the first to appear on the scene of the robbery. He had been sitting by the fire in his bedroom, pondering over the events of the day; grieving at what he regarded as the loss of his son; wondering what Lady Berwick might mean by her persistent desire that he and Susannah should visit town in May; praying that a way might be found to bring his ward and Lord Cleeve together; resolved that his son should not commit the offence of marrying her, bound as he was to another, even if Lizzie Melford were dead. Whatever the conduct of his son might be, he would provide for him; how, depended upon Tom's conduct; it might be that he would have to tie up his money in trust, so that he could only receive it as a pension, month by month. It was clear from Macfarlane's report that he had little prospect of receiving back to his hearth a reformed and dutiful son. But he had long made up his mind to regard Tom as practically dead, so far as any steadfast hope of his good conduct was concerned; though Lady Berwick, in the kindness of her heart, had encouraged him to have faith in his reformation and ultimate prosperity.

He had hardly entered the library, when Lord Cleeve stood by his side.

"Ah, old friend, I fear Bradley was right after all."

"Evidently," the Vicar replied, lifting his candle-lamp so as to expose the open safe to view.

"The shutter and window open," said Cleeve, examining them, "and no splinters. Very odd."

"Yes," said the Vicar, lighting the candles on the mantel. "Who rung the alarm-bell?"

"I did, if you please," said Rogers, the soft-footed man-servant, who appeared with a dark-lantern. "I was just getting into bed, when, drawing the blind, I noticed a light by the library window that couldn't have been there by rights, all havin' retired ; and I saw two men makin' for the sunk fence, so I just up and rung the bell."

"A very sensible thing to have done, Rogers, thank you."

"Thank you, sir," said Rogers, lighting the remainder of the candles in the sconces on the wall. The housekeeper and other servants now entered, including Macfarlane, the latter with an old sword in his hand and his night-cap on his head.

"Eh, gude Lord, what has eventuated?"

"Burglars have eventuated," said the Vicar, with an emphasis on Macfarlane's not infelicitous application of the verb active. "But put that ugly thing away ; we are all friends here."

"The miscreants have escaped, eh? But, jest to think o' it!"

He took off his night-cap, placed the sword in a corner of the room, went to the window, looked at the safe, exclaiming on the scoundrels all the time.

"They've taken the notes," said the Vicar, "and what little gold there was, more than a thousand pounds."

"Eh, but it's awfu'!" said Macfarlane. "One thousand pounds ! A king's ransom, whateffer!"

"It's as well they got away, Cleeve ; there might have been bloodshed."

Then, turning to the servants, he said, "See that Miss Woodcote is not disturbed, if she has not been awakened; and all of you get to bed again; there is nothing else to be done."

"It is very cold, and beginning to snow; shall I close the shutters?" said Cleeve.

"By all means," the Vicar replied.

"Permit me, your lordship," said Rogers, closing the window and fastening the shutters. "It's snowing hard, your reverence."

"I'll gang oot and see if there's ony signs o' the constables aboot; Mr. Bradley said he and his men would be keepin' a keen look oot;" and Macfarlane disappeared, well satisfied with his performance before the Vicar, and mumbling to himself, "A thousand pounds,—it's a braw bagfu'!"

"What do you say, Cleeve, it is an exceptional occasion, shall we have another night-cap? Depend upon it, we shall have Bradley here presently. It is not likely that we shall get to bed for another hour, and when we do, I fear it will hardly be to sleep. I don't mind the loss of the money so much as the outrage; it hurts me sorely to think of the peace of Comberton and the sacredness of one's home being disturbed by such knavery."

"Miss Woodcote was asleep, sir," said the housekeeper.

"Thank God!" said the Vicar. "I will go and speak with her at her door."

The Vicar left the room with the housekeeper.

"Shall I bring the tray, your lordship?" asked Rogers.

"I think so," his lordship replied.

"A cigar, your lordship?"

"Thank you, I have one," said Cleeve, taking from his pocket a cigar-case, and lighting up, while Rogers went for the tray.

"If Bradley knew as much as he professed, he should have prevented the robbery, or taken the thieves red-handed," he remarked to himself.

"This way," Macfarlane was heard saying in the passage; "it's the library."

"I know that," said Bradley, entering the room with a conscious air of importance that irritated Lord Cleeve.

The best and wisest of men have been known to allow trifles light as air to disturb them. Bradley had the misfortune to irritate Lord Cleeve. He did not know why; nor did his lordship altogether understand it. The real truth was that Bradley had discovered his love for Miss Woodcote, and Cleeve thought he presumed upon it. More than once Bradley, with his empty and foolish boast that he was a ladies' man, had looked knowingly at Lord Cleeve, as if there was something between them. He was a kind of echo of Lady Berwick in this respect, and once had almost repeated her very words. "If your lordship was only younger!" he had remarked in an irrelevant way, when Cleeve called at his office to consult him about some matter of county business. Bradley was frequently at Powyke House in connection with Lady Berwick's charities, and it had occurred to Cleeve that they talked him over.

"Oh, good-morning, your lordship, if I may say so," he continued, cheerfully, doffing his cap and handing his stick and cap to Rogers.

"You may say so, and be accurate," said his lordship; "getting on for one o'clock, is it not?"

"I suppose so," said Bradley, his exuberance of manner chilled.

"Taken the thieves, eh?"

"Taken them?"

"You forecast the robbery, and claimed that you had spotted the men who were to do it?"

"Well, not exactly," said Bradley. "But I warned you."

"And went over the household locks and bolts and bars with the Vicar."

"My men are on the track of the robbers; but the snow is unfortunately against them; all footmarks will be obliterated, more's the pity."

"Fate generally seems to take a hand against the Comberton division."

"How does your lordship mean?"

"Interposes so often at the moment of promised success. You would have had the Wulstan forger, if he had not slipped out at the back door as you entered by the front; and I see that the London house-breaker, who has been confessing so many interesting things, says he lodged at old Mother Warren's, next door to your office, for a fortnight while he was planning the Moor Hall affair, and often smoked his pipe with you. He was supposed to be an antiquary, I think? Perhaps you have not seen the report?"

"Yes, thank you, and it's true enough; but the Vicar himself showed him over the Church, and found him very agreeable, I understand. One can't always win, your lordship; life's a bit of a lottery. I dessay your lordship has had your disappointments. Even the course of true love, they say, don't always run smooth; let alone the duties of a police officer."

The worm had turned. Cleeve was saved an angry,

and not too discreet a rejoinder, by the reappearance of the Vicar. Ignoring the worm's daring performance, Cleeve merely remarked to the Vicar, "Bradley has arrived, but he has not brought the thieves along with him."

"I dessay the Vicar is glad I haven't," said Bradley, again with a meaning, if not an impertinent glance at Lord Cleeve.

"Oh, very well," said the Vicar, paying little heed to Bradley, only anxious to assure Cleeve that Miss Woodcote had not been disturbed.

"Susannah was asleep," he said, "and I have urged her not to get up. I am very glad she seems to have heard nothing; it would have upset her, poor child."

"No doubt, no doubt," said Cleeve.

"So unfortunately you were right, Bradley," said the Vicar.

"Very sorry," said Bradley. "May I examine the premises?"

"Certainly, Bradley. It will be a case of fastening the stable door after the horse has gone, I fear."

"Generally the case, your reverence; though I don't think you'll be likely to have another visit of this kind. Have they taken much?"

He was at the safe when he asked the question.

"Over a thousand pounds, Bradley," said the Vicar.

"The devil!—I beg your pardon, sir."

"It is granted, Bradley," said the Vicar. "I suppose we may credit his Satanic Majesty with the business; sometimes I think we do him an injustice; it is so easy to credit the Devil with a man's own special and voluntary sin. But we shall get over it, Bradley; happily nobody is hurt; Lord Cleeve was not on the

spot, nor Macfarlane, or we might have had bloodshed.''

''Nae doot aboot that,'' said Macfarlane. ''The double-faced miscreants !''

Bradley was making a note in his pocket-book, and while Rogers placed the tray of liqueurs and a spirit-kettle upon the table, he went on examining the room. Macfarlane followed him with watchful respect and admiration.

''Eh, but it's a great office, to be in the constabulary,'' he said. ''I never had the awe of ye that I feel the noo.''

The Vicar once more expressed his satisfaction that Susannah had not been disturbed, and wondered what Macfarlane would have done with a certain old sword if he had encountered the burglars.

''The shutters were opened from the inside,'' said Bradley, presently ; ''the window is broken. The fastener was undone from the outside. The shutter-bar must have been lifted from within.''

'' Whom do you suspect ?'' asked Cleeve, once more in a bantering tone. '' Macfarlane or Rogers ?''

'' Macfarlane, eh ?'' said the Vicar, smiling. '' The old reprobate !''

Macfarlane felt like sinking through the floor, but braced himself up and laughed. It was a hollow kind of laugh. But nobody noted it.

''Decidedly opened from the inside,'' said Bradley.

''The veellans !'' said Macfarlane. ''They must ha'e been hidden. Eh, but it's an awfu' business !''

Bradley made notes in his book. The Vicar lighted his pipe. Rogers made the grog.

''Be sparing of the whiskey, Rogers ; but we need

a little fortifying after being broken into and losing our sleep and our money."

"Yes, your reverence," said Rogers.

"You will take Macfarlane into the housekeeper's room, with my compliments," the Vicar continued, "and you, too, may fortify a little."

"Beg pardon, Vicar," said Bradley; "I would like to ask them a question or two."

He was now standing by the organ, with a letter in one hand and a candle-lamp in the other. The glass of the lamp was broken. The lamp had fallen.

"From some one's hand," he said, addressing Lord Cleeve more particularly, "as if they'd been startled. I would like to ask the servants one or two things before they retire."

"Servants!" muttered Macfarlane, to himself. "What better is he himsel'? Servants, and he just a thing maintained oot o' the rates!"

"You spoke?" said Bradley.

"Me?" Macfarlane replied. "I dinna' think so."

The Vicar smiled at Cleeve, who remarked, "Bradley is enjoying himself."

Bradley asked Rogers and Macfarlane a few questions as to the fastening up and other matters, and then assented to their leaving the room. Macfarlane was glad to be gone, and he never felt before so strong a desire for a glass of whiskey. A strong pinch of snuff had been a help to him, but he was conscious of a sinking and a fear, a tendency to subside into his boots, that nothing but the dew of Loch Lomond would correct.

"Here is a letter, sir," said Bradley to the Vicar; "it is addressed to Lady Berwick, bears a foreign stamp and post-mark, New York, I think, and is open.

It was lying beside the lamp ; as if some one while reading it had been startled by a noise at the window, dropped the light in fear, or, may be, had come into the room to look for it, and was surprised and alarmed of a sudden, and——"

The Vicar had opened the letter, and Cleeve, with a serious face, was watching Bradley.

"Shall I read it?" the Vicar asked.

"Yes, sir," said Bradley.

"It is addressed to Lady Berwick," said the Vicar, laying down his pipe. "It is in Tom's handwriting."

There was a tremor in the Vicar's voice.

"It might be a clue," said Bradley. "The house was not broken into from the outside."

"Lady Berwick dropped it, no doubt," said Cleeve ; adding, as he turned to Bradley, "she was here while you were examining the fastenings with the Vicar ; she has been in the habit of receiving letters from Mr. Tom Hussingtree ; I don't see why the Vicar should read it."

"Nor I, indeed," said the Vicar. "On second thoughts, I see every reason why I should not. It may be within police morality to read letters not addressed to them, but nothing could justify us in taking such a liberty with Lady Berwick's correspondence."

"And what clue can there possibly be in finding a letter her ladyship has evidently dropped? She will probably be very much put about at the loss of it. The Vicar can ask her permission to read it in the morning ; eh, Vicar?"

"If Bradley wishes it."

"I do wish it," said Bradley. "Indeed, I think you should read it now, or hand it back to me."

"Hand it back to you?" said Cleeve, angrily. "What do you mean?"

"Only to do my duty," said Bradley.

"Your duty, man! Is it your duty to open Lady Berwick's private letters?"

"In this case, I believe it is."

"And I believe it is not," said Cleeve, deliberately placing his cigar-case upon the letter, and remarking to the Vicar, "Bradley has conceived some foolish theory of the robbery, and——"

"I beg your pardon, Lord Cleeve, I have formed no theory; I only wish to get together the facts, and it is my duty to do so, and I am going to do it."

"It is not your duty to be impertinent, Mr. Superintendent Bradley."

"No, no, Cleeve. I don't think Bradley desires to exceed his duty."

"You have already given us a clue to your extravagant, not to say unmannerly theory," said Cleeve. "What do you make out of this fallen lamp?"

"That some one was in the room when the window was open."

"Some one, man! Who?"

"That is what I'd like to get at."

"You say the shutters were opened from the inside. Do you make out that the person with the lamp opened them?"

"I don't know; perhaps not."

"Perhaps, man! Get your facts together first, and think them out afterwards," said Cleeve, angrily; for he, too, had begun to form a theory. The letter which Bradley had found was the letter Lady Berwick wanted him to read, and the contents of which she had repeated to him. Had she left it for Susannah to read?

Was it a genuine letter? Or a forgery? Was it a letter to cover this night's transactions? He began to fear that Bradley knew more of Tom Hussingtree's movements than any of them suspected; and he was determined to beat the theory out of him and defeat its development, if possible.

"I desire to get my facts together," said Bradley. "That letter is one of my facts, and should be left in my possession."

"It will not be left in your possession," said Cleeve.

"My lord," said Bradley, closing his note-book, placing it in his breast-pocket, and buttoning his coat, "you are the Lord-Lieutenant, and know what magisterial as well as police duties are; and should do me the justice to observe that I have tried to do my duty."

"Possibly, according to your lights; but there is something unfortunate in your manner of trying to do your duty."

"You have not encouraged me to be over civil," the officer replied, doggedly. "From the first you have made light of the business; you jeered at my warnings, you sneer at me now."

"Have patience, Bradley. His lordship did not mean to hurt your feelings; perhaps you were a little too officious."

"Then I humbly beg your pardon, sir, and his lordship's, if I am to blame."

"Say no more about it, Bradley. I do not say you are to blame; I think you have done your best; but if the Vicar will excuse me saying so, I think we will dispense with your further services until the morning."

"As you think best, Cleeve. Bradley reminds us

that you are the Lord-Lieutenant; we are both magistrates; and, with due submission, Bradley, I think we will adjourn the business, as his lordship purposes, until to-morrow."

"Supposing my men have taken the thieves?" said Bradley, looking straight at Cleeve.

"In that case hold them, of course; and report to the Vicar the moment they are in custody."

"Very well, your lordship," said Bradley, preparing to leave the room."

"Don't let us part in anger, Bradley," said the Vicar; "we have been quite sufficiently perturbed without feeling that we may have hurt your *amour propre*. Take a glass of whiskey—eh, Cleeve?"

"By all means. Sit down, Bradley."

"Thank you," said Bradley.

Cleeve rose, and rang the bell.

"The Superintendent will take a glass of whiskey, Rogers," said the Vicar, when the servant appeared.

"Yes, sir," said Rogers. "Scotch, Mr. Bradley?"

"Thank you," said Bradley.

The grog was served; and Bradley, pouring a wineglassful from the decanter which Rogers handed to him, lifted the glass with much formality; and saying, "My humble respects to your reverence and to your lordship," emptied it, and filled it anew.

"Yours is not pleasant work," said the Vicar.

"Not always," said Bradley; "but, after all, there's a sort of satisfaction in getting over difficulties."

He emptied his glass again and rose to his feet, saying, with a glance at Cleeve, "If we could arrange everything as we wish, we should all be the happier. Good-night, Vicar. Good-night, Lord Cleeve."

"Damn the fellow!" said Cleeve, between his teeth,

as the Vicar rose to see the officer to the door. He wished to show Bradley some special attention to make up for what he thought was just a little undue harshness on the part of Lord Cleeve.

"Damn his impertinence!" said Cleeve, to himself. It was a very rare thing for Cleeve to swear.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

PROBLEMS AND LOVERS.

"I THOUGHT you despised Hardy and regarded Grant Allen as an outrage?" said Mr. Orlik Duff, the cynic of the Parthenon, smoking his after-dinner cigar over a whiskey-and-soda to Nettleship's coffee and cigarette.

"Not the men, dear fellow, only two of their books."

"'Tess' and 'The Woman'?"

"Yes; so I do."

"And yet you are taking up the parable?"

"No," said Nettleship, nervously; "you mistake me."

"You ask me if I think a woman with a past, a nice girl, as you put it, who has consented out of love and good nature simply before marriage, might not make another man a good and deserving wife?"

"I didn't put it in those words, you know, but that is the gist of it."

"You are always writing a novel or an article, or what you call an essay or some inconsequential trifle of that kind, when you sit down to cross-examine me," said Duff.

"You are so deuced clever and up-to-date," said Nettleship, "so informing."

"So what? 'Up-to-date!' Keep your slang for your literature, as you call it, Nettleship. Let us try and think that the Parthenon is still a club for gentlemen."

"There is no knowing to what conclusion a flight of fancy may lead one," said Nettleship, pouring a liqueur-glass of Benedictine into his second cup of coffee.

"One to you, Nettleship," said Duff. "Go on with your novel. You want to be in the movement. Very well. Let it be a past worth telling; and if it is a problem, solve it. Don't beat about the bush, as Pinero does. Give it shape. You may in a novel; you may not in a play; they won't let you. If they would, Pinero's the man to do it. A nice girl, did you say? Nonsense; let her be Phrynne in silks and frills and trailing petticoats, with a divine smile and a generous hand; a she-devil at heart; on the surface an angel; and give her for a consort a cultured cross between Jabez and Peace. Then go ahead, and tell us the history of their two children, a boy and a girl, and cut the ground from under that purulent old dodderer, Ibsen! If I was in the business, that is the kind of scenario I should work upon."

"I tell you, you don't understand me at all, Duff, my dear fellow; not at all. I am only putting a hypothetical case; it is, indeed, the case of a friend of mine. She is a well-educated girl, an unsophisticated product of an unsophisticated village, outside the world, don't you know. To that rural Paradise comes——"

"The old story, I know," interrupted Duff. "Satan in top-boots and scarlet coat, fresh from the hunt, the son of the Lord-Lieutenant; in the old days they would call him the young Squire. Poor Terriss would have played him to the life. He loves her. She is fresh and sweet and peach-and-creamy; he surfeited with the London imitation. They meet on the sly. Hetty Sor-

rel, you know, as you would say, old chap; Hetty Sorrel and——''

"Are you telling this story, or am I?" said Nettleship.

"Let us collaborate," Duff replied, knocking the ash from his cigar and sinking deeper down in his saddle-back chair.

"She had every reason to believe he was a gentleman. He betrayed her."

"Of course, of course; they always do."

"Then damn them!" said Nettleship, with a vicious stamp of his foot. "I'd have them bastinadoed, if we lived in a civilised country."

"We are devilish barbarous, that's the truth," said Duff.

"Scratch a Russian, they say, and you'll find a Tartar; scratch the average young Englishman, and you'll find an infernal scoundrel," said Nettleship, moved by the imaginative picture of a top-booted, scarlet-coated, hunting fellow, fresh from Oxford.

"Scratch a Scotchman, and he'll thank you," said Duff. "I'm a bit of a Scotchman myself, and I know."

"You never will be serious," said Nettleship.

"Always, dear friend, when you are funny."

"You think I'm funny now, eh?"

"Very."

"All right, then we'll say no more; let us change the subject. The tragedy on the Indian frontier is funny to you, no doubt?"

"I'm sorry, Nettleship. You have something on your mind. Well, out with it, old chap. Don't put hypothetical cases. Be honest with me. I have not always been a bachelor. Anyhow, you may trust me with your secret."

"Not mine."

"No?"

"My dearest friend's."

"Very well; we understand."

"She brought her shame to London."

"The right market," said Duff.

"Good-bye, old chap!" exclaimed Nettleship, drinking his coffee and leaving the room without another word.

"Now he has lost his temper," said Duff. "I can't help it. Why the devil was he not frank with me? The idea that you catch old birds by salting their tails is so played out! Some designing woman has got hold of him at last. And who shall escape the designing woman! Waiter!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Has Mr. Nettleship left the club?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you."

He had left the club, and returned to his chambers, his work, and his lady type-writer. He had basely mastered her secret. At least, most of it. Disguising himself, he had followed her home on two or three occasions; she on her wheel, he in a hansom. She was living at Barnet, with a labourer and his wife, two old people who eked out a precarious living by letting two rooms. It was a clean, wholesome little place. There was an infant. It was plain to see that the young woman who called herself Mary Bradford was its mother. Nettleship looked in at the clean and lace-curtained window. He saw the girl going about the house, making it neat and tidy, and chatting to the old woman, and petting the child that sat by the table in a tall chair and cooed at its mother and helped to brighten

and humanise the cottage. Nettleship took in this scene on several occasions, and drank a glass of ale at the adjacent inn, where the old labourer enjoyed his pipe and glass. Nettleship got into conversation with the old man, who praised his wife's young lodger extravagantly; "the kindest young 'ooman he ever 'ad known, kindness was 'ardly the word for it; she was more nor even a sister-of-mercy in her ways; and yet lively, oh, bless you, lively was 'ardly the word for it; and yet went to Church a-Sundays reg'lar." It was rather mean of Nettleship, one is inclined to think, to hint at husbands and other ties of womanhood; but, "Lor' bless you," the labourer said, "she 'ain't got no 'usband; she let on at onc'st about 'er position; truth itself. She worn't goin' to come into a' 'onest house and pretend as she'd a 'usband! But she be worth the best man as ever drew breath, as you may say. A man as could deceive such a young 'ooman, well, hell's too good for 'im, that's what I say." "And by heavens, you are right!" Nettleship had exclaimed; and, having gleaned a few facts from Mary herself about her native village and the inhabitants thereof, with the skill of the story-teller he had reckoned up her blighted life, and from admiration to pity is a short step on the way to love.

Lizzie Melford had come to like Nettleship, too, very much. Mrs. Lightfoot had continually sung his praises to her. Nobody had any idea what a good man he was, according to Mrs. Lightfoot. And the women he might have married! But he knew them! Mrs. Lightfoot knew them, too: "a bad, wicked lot, my dear, the kind of women Mr. Nettleship meets in Society. Yet he goes to all the best houses. Do you ever look at the cards on his mantel-shelf?" No, she

said, she did not. "My dear, the best people in town; more's the pity, when you thinks of their goin's on. Look at the cases in the papers; blue blood, too, ladies of title a-bettin' and smokin'; but, thank heaven, for the sake of our sex, there's ladies and ladies. Did you ever hear of Lady Berwick, now? Why, of course you have."

Lizzie looked up, with a nervous tremor, afraid that Mrs. Lightfoot had discovered her secret.

"Why, everybody as is anybody knows Lady Berwick, of Grosvenor Square, and Powyke House in the country. What a name, 'ain't it? Mr. Nettleship often goes to Lady Berwick's in Grosvenor Square, and's often thought o' goin' to Powyke,—it is a name to be christened with, 'ain't it? But he hates visitin', do Mr. Nettleship; prefers a hotel, where he can do as he likes. But Lady Berwick, she is the best and noblest of the aristocracy he knows; she visits the poor, goes up into the East-End, takes tea with the shadiest of 'em, gets up concerts and things for the wretches, don't mind what slum she goes into; and yet her house in Grosvenor Square,—well, I've heard it beats Buckingham Palace itself. And the parties she gives, all London goes to them. I've stood on the pavement, many's the time, to see the swells go in; all sorts: Royalties and Mr. Nettleship, and lords and ladies, and Sir Henry Irving and Mr. Tree as plays 'The Red Lamp,' and Lady Jeune as is a judge's wife, and the Countess Jerome and Lady Marlborough, and Sir Luke Fyldees, and Lord Besant and Sir Hall Caine,—leastwise, I'm not sure about their titles, but gentlemen what writes, like Mr. Nettleship, but not half so well; in fact, it's nameless, the number of emmerment ladies and gentlemen as is received by Lady Berwick. It's a good

thing there is one lady now and then at the top of the tree as we women can swear by and honner !"

Lizzie was only just getting over her fright at the mention of Lady Berwick, when Nettleship returned and they resumed work for the day.

"I think we will leave that chapter, my dear," said Nettleship, "and take up a later one ; just an episode."

She had long been accustomed to his calling her "my dear ;" but he was so respectful with it that she rather liked to have him address her familiarly. His voice was quite soft for a man's. There was something fascinating, too, in the honesty of his manner, his manly view of life—manly in the best sense, his respect for women, and his interest in herself. Lizzie often went home to Barnet thinking of him all the way, when she was not thinking of her child ; and as she spun along the Finchley Road, and bounded over the bridge by the Welsh Harp and up hill and down dale, her face flushed with the exercise, she was most pleasant to behold ; but one almost wishes Nettleship had not followed her to spy upon her humble little home and pluck out the heart of its mystery.

"Are you ready ?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well ;" and he proceeded to pour out the episode, as he called it, with more than his customary volubility.

"'The man had grown to love her. At first it was but a benevolent instinct. He was her elder. She must have been ten years younger ; and so sweet, with such a tender expression, and a heart without guile, he was sure of it. It was strange, he had often thought, that she would say so little about herself. Whatever her secret might be, he was sure it did her no dis-

honour. There are instances in the lives of women where from one point of view dishonour might be charged, while from another the very act that carries dishonour would be excusable even in the eyes of Diana herself.' ''

Nettleship felt he was getting a little mixed in his similes and modern instances; but he could correct these things later, if need be. Lizzie followed him with a quick pencil, and in keeping up with his pace lost some of the meaningness of his words; but she had often felt that certain incidents and episodes of his romance might have applied to herself, if she had chosen to put the cap on.

'' 'One day he determined to find out her secret; he was base enough to follow her. She lived outside the great town; far away in a little cottage, clean and neat, a cottage that is typical of the best characteristics of the British labourer. And there he saw her secret; saw it with his own eyes, a secret that could not be hidden. It was an infant!''

Nettleship paused. Lizzie finished the sentence with difficulty. Her heart beat fast and furious; but she sat still upon her chair, her feet hard pressed against the floor.

'' 'Again and again he saw her in her humble home, and heard reports of her from her neighbours. Everything confirmed his own good opinion. Husband? No, she had no husband; she had been betrayed; she had fled from home and friends to hide her shame. Did she still love the man who had done her that great wrong? There are women who cherish the hand that smites them. There are women who forgive the seducer who has practised upon their generosity. There are women who love through all sins and dangers and

crimes. "Did she love that man still?" he asked himself, this other who had tracked her to her place of rest and retreat, not out of idle curiosity, but because he loved her, because he felt he could not live without her. "'Did she love her betrayer?'"

Lizzie had laid down her pencil. Nettleship did not see her. He was pacing the room. Presently he turned to look at her. She was pale to the lips, her eyes fixed on him.

"My dear child!" he exclaimed, taking her hand. "My dear Mary!"

"Oh, Mr. Nettleship!" she said.

"Have you guessed?" he asked, his breath coming quickly; "have you guessed?"

"Yes," she said, with a great sigh.

"And will you be my wife?"

"Oh, if I dared say Yes!"

"Say it! say it, my child! Say it, and I will make the world a happier place than you have ever known it. I love you,—honestly, dearly, passionately!"

"Can you forget the past?" she said, tears giving her relief. "Can you forgive what you saw at Barnet?"

"My love!" he said, and took her into his arms; "we will live in the future."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

SUSANNAH CROSS-EXAMINES LADY BERWICK.

SUSANNAH had not been quite herself since the burglary. The Vicar had noticed the change in her, with sorrow and something of bewilderment. Whenever Bradley had called she had been anxious and troubled. He had mentioned this to Lord Cleeve, who appeared to have what the Vicar could not help thinking was a rather unworthy grudge against the officer. "But," as the clergyman argued to himself, "if Cleeve had not some little weaknesses, he would be too perfect a character; and Bradley was undoubtedly a stupid fellow to give his lordship any cause of anger, so good and kindly a fellow, and so considerate of the feelings of the humblest."

"No, dear," Susannah said, "there is really nothing the matter with me; a little *triste*, as Lady Berwick says, that is all. It may be the weather; and you yourself are always rather sad at Christmas-time and New Year."

"But, my love, Christmas and New Year are past, and we may soon be looking for the Spring, and then to our visit to London."

"I sometimes wish we were not going to town," she said.

"Doctor Walker says you need change, my love, and he actually advises a season in London. Besides, Lady Berwick has our promise."

"Yes, and of course we must not disappoint her."

"Lord Cleeve starts for his trip round the world in May."

"He is really going, then?"

"Oh, yes."

"He has only just returned from Egypt."

"Ah, my dear child, if events had turned out differently from the crooked road they have taken, who knows, we might all have been fellow-travellers. I would have liked to see Egypt."

"I seem to have unsettled everybody," she said; "and nothing could have been further from my desire."

"My darling!" was all the Vicar could say in reply.

"Don't let us drift back again to that old sad subject, my dear," she said. "I know it distresses you."

"You are looking for Tom's return," the Vicar answered, however, taking up the subject afresh. "It is his letter to Lady Berwick that is preying upon your mind; you dread his home-coming; so do I, Susannah, so do I."

"Is Lord Cleeve going to pay us a visit before he leaves England?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," he said, "and he may travel to town with us, when we go up to Lady Berwick's reception."

"I am glad of that," she said, and sighed.

"And yet you say so with a sigh, my love."

"It is all so sad, is it not? Your son an exile, Lord Cleeve going to the uttermost parts of the earth; you and I, dear, left all alone, and you unhappy. And all, as it seems, on my account. You have had recent news of Tom?"

"Yes; news that, under other circumstances, would be good news, but since it will influence you, alas, in

the direction that is most distasteful to me, I could almost find in my heart to regret it. Lady Berwick has had another letter. From the day Macfarlane left him and his evil companion, the lad seems to have turned over a new leaf. My relative at Brooklyn has influenced him for the better, and through his introduction, Tom has engaged in an occupation in which he has been most successful ; something in the way of honest commerce, in which his education has been useful to him : and he talks of coming home early in the Spring. You are not listening.''

''Yes, dear, I am,'' she answered, in some confusion.

''I know in your heart you do not love him ; I am sure of it : and yet you will sacrifice yourself to your word. Was ever an unfortunate father in so wretched and perplexing a position, racked by the knowledge of his son's unworthiness, in a darker and more terrible way than you can imagine ; a secret, my dear, an awful secret, that I cannot, dare not tell you. And yet——''

''My dear guardian, what secret?'' she exclaimed, turning pale.

''You know what it is to bear a burden of that kind ; you kept a secret from me, dear——''

''Yes, but——''

''I know, I know ; and Lady Berwick, in the mistaken kindness of her heart, thought you right.''

''What secret do you mean?''

''The secret of your engagement to my unhappy, my miserable son.''

''Oh !'' said Susannah, with a sigh of relief.

''There is no other secret?'' said the Vicar, with a strong note of interrogation in his voice and manner.

"Yes," she answered, her face flushing. "You said you had a secret."

"I may not tell you. Lord Cleeve thinks it would not be right."

"Lord Cleeve knows it?"

"Yes."

"And he is of opinion that you should not share it with me?"

"Yes."

"Whom does it most particularly concern?"

"You in particular; next to you, all of us."

"And you may not tell me?"

"Not now; mayhap never. It implicates Tom, though he might redeem his sin."

"Might he? How? Oh, tell me how!"

"Not now, dear, not now."

"Oh, my dear Vicar, my second father, you must tell me! You don't know what it may mean to me, to him, to you!"

"I will consult Lord Cleeve once more."

"Tell me one thing. Is it about the burglary?"

"Burglary, my love? No!"

"Thank God!" she exclaimed, and covered her face with her hands.

"Why, my dear, what makes you think of the burglary? I declare, I had almost forgotten all about it. But Tom has committed a sin I can never forget or forgive, unless he should do the person justice. It may be that he has done so; who knows? It is in Lord Cleeve's kind heart to think so." And secretly the Vicar was hoping that in the end Tom would come home, with Lizzie Melford as his wife. She had been traced to London, and had disappeared about the same time that Tom had left for America; though Macfar-

lane, sounded in that direction, had not once risen to the suggestion. It might be, however, that Macfarlane was pledged to secrecy.

"We seem to be playing at cross-purposes," Susannah said to Lady Berwick, the day following this conversation, having made a special visit to Powyke to try and unravel the puzzle of the Vicar's strange remarks; and Lady Berwick found that Susannah, in trouble and anxiety, with a deadly secret of her own to keep in protecting the honoured name of Hussingtree and sparing the Vicar the terrible knowledge of his son's awful delinquency, was a different woman to deal with from the girl she had entrapped into an engagement with Tom; a girl who had become a woman of resource and firmness, one who had suffered and was strong.

"You have a secret you are keeping from the Vicar and me," she said.

"My dear Susannah!"

"Yes, that is what I mean. You are not frank with us."

"My dear Susannah!"

"I know, dear Lady Berwick, that you love me and are our dear neighbour and friend; but I am very miserable. What is this strange secret about Tom Hussingtree?"

"I know of none."

"What is this other letter you have received from him?"

"Here it is, my love," she said, going to her desk and placing a letter in Susannah's hand. It was from Tom to Lady Berwick. He would have liked, he said, to write to Susannah; but she might not receive it; and, moreover, he thought it more honourable not to

write to her under the circumstances ; he would achieve success first, and come home and claim the reward that had been promised him. Even the Vicar could not refuse to take the hand of the penitent, and that would be his attitude—"penitent, and in the best sense, don't you know, my dear Lady Berwick," he went on, "having turned over the new leaf, and with the favour of Fortune, and, I may surely say, with the approval of the Almighty, a changed man, my dear Lady Berwick, changed in mind, body, and estate, and with hard-earned money in my purse and a business to return to, in case the Vicar is still obdurate ; but with my dear, sweet Susannah as my bride."

Susannah read the letter impatiently. The reader will guess the source of its inspiration,—Jim Renshaw. Lady Berwick did not know this ; nor that Tom had really returned. On this point Susannah satisfied herself that this was her own particular and burning secret.

"Where did this come from?" she asked, handing back the letter.

"From New York."

"You know that, of course."

"Only from the post-mark. It bore the same indication of origin as the other."

"The one I dropped in the library the night of the burglary?"

"Yes, and about which the man Bradley was so curious ; I wonder why?"

"Oh, Lady Berwick, I am so unhappy!" said Susannah, and sank down upon the very seat where Tom had made daring love to her by order of the scheming widow.

"I am sure you are ; but it need not make you unkind to me, love."

"No, no, it need not. Pray forgive me. I sometimes wish I had never been born."

"Nay, sweetheart," the widow replied, sitting down by her side and embracing her; "don't say that. There are many happy days in store for you yet."

"Oh, no, no!" said the girl. "But, oh, why do you seem to hold me so strongly to this engagement?"

Susannah suddenly dried her eyes, and rose to her feet.

"My love! what do you mean?"

"Why do you appear to meet me at every turn with my promise, and Tom's hopes and future, and all that? Why do you never seem to give me a chance to reconsider?"

"My love!"

"You could surely have had no motive in bringing us together that day and urging his claims upon me, claims that were unreal and untrue! Oh, Lady Berwick, why? Why?"

"Susannah, dearest, you are beside yourself. Motive? What other than your happiness, his happiness!"

"And why does he write to you? And not to me? And why do you hint cruel things of Lord Cleeve? Oh, don't let me doubt you! The world is so dark, as it is, and I begin to doubt everything and everybody. Oh, do you really think these letters came from New York?"

"My darling, be calm. You are not well. I love you better than I ever loved my own child; and I understand what your feelings are now; you are a little hysterical, and want change of scene, change of air. Dr. Walker says you are run down. Oh, my love, don't be angry with me; you break my heart!"

"If you only knew what I know," said the girl, despairingly. "They say women cannot be true to each other. Oh, Lady Berwick, you are my friend?"

"My sweetheart! You are quite feverish. Let me bring you to my room. Come and lie down a little. You shall have a nice cup of tea, and I will drive you home and take luncheon at the Vicarage, if you will have me; if you don't think I am your enemy,—I, who would make any sacrifice for your happiness, and the dear Vicar's. Why, my love, what else have I to live for, but you three,—Tom, you, and the Vicar! Nay, if you do not love Tom any more, we must try and break off the match; anything, rather than you and I and the Vicar should not be friends and love each other. And Tom? Oh, well, there are plenty of girls who will only be too glad to console him. Come, my love."

Susannah, having no more to say, and evidently nothing to learn from her ladyship, permitted herself to be led to her ladyship's chamber, where there were salts and scents and restoratives and confections, and where after a time Susannah became calm and responded to the widow's embraces. And they went to the Vicarage in time for luncheon; and the Vicar declared, when it was over and he had seen Lady Berwick to her carriage, that her ladyship's visit had cheered him mightily, and that her naturally high spirits were the outcome of her goodness of heart and the continual practice of benevolence,—"the most generous parishioner any clergyman could ever have been blessed with."

As the days drew out and signs of Spring came back again to the hills and dales and gardens of Comberton-cum-Besford, and nothing further happened to distress

her, Tom making no sign, and Lord Cleeve calling now and then at the Vicarage, Susannah appeared to be recovering her good health and normally cheerful spirits. Shortly before the time fixed for the visit to town, Cleeve accepted the Vicar's invitation to stay a short time in the old happy quarters. One day they all three drove over to Cleeve House, and spent the day there. Cleeve showed them his Egyptian trophies, and Susannah took the deepest interest in them, and Cleeve was very happy. If the engagement with Tom should lapse, as he encouraged himself to think it would, he might hope to return from his long proposed journey with a good chance of success. He would be continually writing to the Vicar. Hussingtree would keep him well informed. With his permission, if opportunity occurred, he would write to Susannah herself. It might be that, after all, Tom would be induced to marry Lizzie Melford. From inquiries he had made in various directions, outside of Bradley, he was inclined to believe that, after all, the girl had followed Tom to America. Anyhow, it was best he should go away. If Tom came back, it was best; if he stayed away, it was best; and yet, as he looked at the girl and listened to her voice, he felt that he was taking upon himself a kind of task, a penance; and for what? It was borne in upon him at times that he was too punctilious in regarding the engagement of the Vicar's son as an insuperable objection to his own suit. He had never, since that miserable disclosure, addressed Susannah even in terms of cordial friendship; nor had she, he was bound to admit, encouraged him to do so; though on this visit to Cleeve she had been more than neighbourly in her admiration of the house and in her anxiety to have him relate his adventures and tell her all about

the things he had brought home, several of which he had begged the Vicar to accept, always selecting any souvenir of his travels that Susannah had most admired.

And so the days passed away, amidst hopes and fears, and there were primroses in the hedges and lilacs by the way, and budding fruit trees, and larks singing overhead, as the Vicar and Susannah drove through Comberton and along the leafy lanes to Shrub Hill, *en route* for the Vicar s lodgings of years ago on Half Moon Street.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE VISIT TO LONDON.

"NOTHING suits me so well as black moiré and diamonds," said Lady Berwick, with an air of triumph, as she posed before a full-length mirror between the two daintily draped windows of the smaller of the two drawing-rooms in Grosvenor Square.

She called it her own little room, though it was spacious and usually open to every visitor. In the estimation of friends it was her business room. It was here that she kept up the same idea of enterprise and activity in the public interest that obtained at Powyke. Here indeed was a desk almost duplicating the one that was crowded with papers and accounts and charitable appeals that we wot of in the country drawing-room. After the manner of the establishment at Powyke, the Grosvenor Square house was furnished with an eye to artistic effect, not forgetting the "lady-like litter," as one of her admirers called it, that should always distinguish a woman's apartments; and Lady Berwick made a point of femininity. She had no sympathy with short hair and narrow skirts, with masculine jackets and masculine occupations that some women affect. She was much too clever for that, though she was not quite so clever as she thought.

"I have a presentiment that this is going to be an eventful night," she said, rearranging some trifling detail of lace or ribbon, and stepping back from the mirror the better to judge of the general effect of her

dress as an artist will step back a few paces from his easel. In the more real study, it must be said that Lady Berwick had every reason to be content. If she had used any artificial aid to heighten the beauty of her face, it had been used with a dexterous cunning. She was one of those women, however, who, having anything like a complexion at all, are content with what Nature has given them. Lady Berwick had cultivated her good looks with wholesome exercise and plenty of fresh air. She was the picture of good health, good temper, and prosperity ; but there was a certain suggestion of watchfulness in the expression of her face that spoke more of physical beauty than nobility of nature or tenderness of heart. To the careless and unobservant, however, she played the part of the generous hostess, the philanthropic lady of the manor, the good friend and the kindly woman of the world to perfection. The world often takes a woman for what she pretends to be.

There was a knock at the door. Lady Berwick sat down near her desk and opened the latest *Quarterly Review*. There entered Keziah, alone. Lady Berwick expected her to usher in some intimate friend, for it was as yet too early for even the first guests of the evening.

"I thought it might have been Lord Cleeve. He said he would come very early, because he could not stay very late. And his manner seemed strange. 'Another engagement?' I asked ; and he said, 'Yes, with railway trains and ocean steamers.' I wonder what is in the wind? Did his lordship say anything more than ordinary when he called the other day?"

"No, my lady," said Keziah.

"He is quite confidential with you, Keziah ; often

has an odd parting observation to make as he leaves."

"His lordship is affability itself, my lady, and I nearly always ask him how he thinks your ladyship is looking."

"Yes?"

"'Charming, Keziah,' he will say; and on one occasion he added, 'as the Vicar says.'"

"Yes? I don't quite understand."

"Meant that he was of the same opinion," said Keziah. "It's the Vicar's constant remark, my lady, how charming you are."

"Really! And Lord Cleeve, he——"

"Said it just hearty like, as if he envied the Vicar having said the good thing before him; yes, indeed. But, my lady, who do you think has just come?"

"Don't ask me conundrums, Keziah."

"My brither David's in the housekeeper's room."

"Bring him here. I would like to see him."

"Here, my lady, and he's sae shy?"

"Here? Why, yes, of course. He's a better man than many I have seen here."

"Thank you for David, my lady; though I fear he doesn't deserve such consideration."

"I know you never did quite approve of David."

"I'm willing to allow he's improved wi' travel."

"No doubt; and you too, Keziah, and your new cap becomes you; you look very well indeed; that dull-gold bit of ribbon suits your complexion. Go and bring Macfarlane; let him come by the back stair."

Keziah smiled, and went off by her ladyship's private door.

"Come up with the Vicar and Susannah, of course,"

said Lady Berwick to herself. "I wonder what the Vicar will think of my reception; too Bohemian, I fear, for his sense of the proprieties; he must be cured of that."

David's was one of those easy consciences that nothing disturbed for more than five minutes. The proverb of the water and the duck's back applied equally well to his temperament. He was altogether an irresponsible person. His memory served him, too, as perhaps a better trained memory should. It only permanently registered agreeable incidents. Macfarlane had entirely forgotten his share in the burglary at the Vicarage. It might have never been, except for the pleasure he took in baiting Superintendent Bradley on the inefficiency of his department in the public service. The affair had not cast the smallest shadow upon David's life and habits. On the contrary, it was a secret satisfaction to him that Tom had been able to fill his empty pockets from his father's safe. Who had more right? But Bradley was a shrewder man than David imagined. Though he never once suspected that Macfarlane knew anything of the robbery, he continually pondered the mystery of the letter and the candle-lamp that were found lying together by the organ. Miss Woodcote's firm denial of all knowledge of either only convinced Bradley the more that she could give valuable information if she was so disposed, and that there was only one reason why she kept it back; which reason he had kept to himself, though he had carefully followed up the clue it suggested.

"Oh, your boots are all right, you wiped them downstairs," Keziah was heard saying at the door. "Come along;" and Macfarlane made his appearance and was less embarrassed than usual, in her ladyship's

presence, though he still swung his hat in his hand, in an uncertain nervous way.

"Come in, Macfarlane," said her ladyship, graciously.

"Eh, there's nae gude in gangin' tae heaven wi' sic' a place on airth!" he said; for Keziah had warned him to say something pleasant and complimentary.

"You are quite a courtier, Macfarlane."

"Nae, I'm ainly what they just ca' a head man and bottlewasher, and not much at that. But what may ye call a court'er, my lady?"

"One who pays in admiration more than is due," said her ladyship, with a smile of satisfaction at the point and promptness of her repartee.

Macfarlane, dressed in his best manner and with all the airs of a traveller, had superintended the packing for town; looked after the luggage, disputed the charges for extra weight, both at Shrub Hill and Paddington; secured the best compartment for the Vicar and Miss Woodcote, and a third-class seat for himself as near their carriage as possible; and at Oxford had informed the Vicar that there would be time for refreshment. In a vague kind of way, without remembering his great offence, it seemed to Macfarlane that he was making up to the Vicar for some short-coming; and the Vicar was very pleased with him. Macfarlane plumed himself with undisguised self-satisfaction when he had seen the Vicar and Susannah into the brougham that had been ordered for them and was superintending the loading of a four-wheeler with the baggage. He stood with his arms folded across his breast, now and then unfolding them to take a capacious pinch of snuff, like a rural Napoleon of uncertain age, legs astride, tall silk hat on the back of his head, black plush waistcoat,

double-breasted, an old-fashioned satin stock, and a black coat, with pockets at the side and bulging with handkerchiefs, gloves, luncheon-box, and flask, a kind of game-keeper's jacket. He looked from under his bushy eye-brows out of his two little eyes (too close together to be honest), and pursed up his mouth and wrinkled his brows with the intensity of—well, a little Napoleon ; and yet, in the presence of Lady Berwick he was the sycophant we have seen, with just a touch on occasion of Scotch independence and pride. He was a queer mixture ; crooked, but in many ways very human.

"There's nae much harm in that, my lady. I dinna' mind the admiration ; it's the bawbees I'd nae be inclined to pay mair than's due."

"Well, come in ; don't stand there like a half-hatched chick," said Keziah, at his elbow, for Macfarlane still hovered in the doorway, his eyes wandering from the pictures on the walls to the picture in black moiré and diamonds.

"Eh, but I seem to want the path," he said, looking down upon the lovely carpet. "I seem to be a gardener, carefu' aboot walking over the flower-beds."

"Nonsense, Macfarlane," said her ladyship. "There is no more beautiful house than the Vicar's."

"Ye may cage a rook in a nightingale's cage, my lady, but it's a rook a' the same. Take a seat? Thank ye, my lady," and he sat upon the nearest chair a trifle confused as to the effect of his simile of the rook and the nightingale and anxious to bring his preliminary efforts at something complimentary to a close.

"Well, now tell me the news of Comberton, the Vicarage, and everything, not forgetting Powyke, Cleeve, and the county generally."

"That's what they ca' a large order, my lady. I dinna' ken that I'm quite equal tae it. The police ha'e na' yet found oot whae commeetted the burglary, though they're forever speerin' aboot. They're puir bodies whateffer, and verra' fond o' the Veecar's whaskey."

"And how is Comberton generally?"

"Weel, I'm jest thinkin' they're mair smilin' and happy i' their minds sin' the Secreetary o' Dorcas were laid up wi' the lumbago. Eh, but I couldna' help thinkin' o' yer ladyship when I first hear'd o' it, and I said to mysel', eh, but I'd jest like tae gang and iron her back!"

"I don't wonder at their being more smiling, my lady; they have to read three tracts to get as many yards of flannel."

"I never knew that," said her ladyship. "Is it really true, Keziah?"

"It's ower true, my lady," said Macfarlane. "She worries them mair aboot the next world than she comforts them in this. But talkin' o' meenistrations——"

He dropped his voice and looked round the room.

"I want tae ken a thing that may happen tae be a secret."

"Have no fear, Macfarlane," said her ladyship; "this place is as secret as Downing Street."

"Dooning Street! I ha'e hear'd o' the place. There's a Foreign Meenister there! I reckon he preaches i' some outlandish language or ither; though I hardly think it richt tae mak' releegion a secret."

"There are many who do, Macfarlane; but what is your secret?"

"Nae, nae, it isna' mine. But is the Veecar come up tae be made a beeshop, or anythin'?"

"Bless me, no, not that I am aware of! Why?"

"Weel, when we were packin' up he had sic' a pile o' sermons put intil his trunk that one might be justified in thinkin' he'd gotten tae preach the de'il oot o' a victorious airmy!"

Lady Berwick laughed heartily, but Keziah detected the chuckle of mischief that made just a little jar in it. Indeed, Lady Berwick's laugh was not exactly mirthful at any time.

"When did Lord Cleeve leave the Vicarage?" she asked, turning for a moment to look at a packet of papers, tied with red silk, on her pretty old Chippendale desk.

"Weel, his lairdship should ha'e come up wi' the Veecar; but somehow there's been a kind o' a strangeness i' the house o' late. His lairdship has nae always been learnin' his lessons wi' Miss Woodcote i' the library."

Lady Berwick answered without looking at him, her interest keenly awakened, though she affected indifference to the subject of all others that she desired Macfarlane to talk about.

"Indeed, really?" she said.

"It's verra' likely they've learned the lot, for they certainly were deep i' the study o' books and papers at a' hours o' the day."

"With the Vicar?"

"Nae; jest wi' themsel's, whateffer."

"In the library?"

"Aye."

"And have they been riding together?"

"Aye; they jest scandalised the pious and the aged by ridin' the new-fangled inventions o' the de'il they ca' 'bikes,' tae see the Secreteary o' Dorcas when she

was doon wi' the lumbago. Awfu' inventions ! I tried his lairdship's, wi' the sanction o' his man, and it was jest as if I'd been struck by lightnin' ; it's lucky I came doon on my head ! Otherwise I might ha'e been laid up wi' broken bones.''

''But you always are lucky, Macfarlane ; your American adventures prove that. Miss Woodcote rides very well, does she not?''

''She jest appears tae fly along the road. I'm thinkin' she might flee an angel for a wager, like the man i' the story, if she'd a mind tae ; and I'd back her for a' I'm worth.''

''You would not dare to tell the Vicar,'' said her ladyship, laughing, while Keziah for a moment thought, after all, that David was not such a fool as he looked. David's wizened face became more than ever wrinkled about the eyes, and a faint chuckle escaped his hard lips, as he remarked, ''Nae, but I dinna' think the Veecar wad mind ; for I ha'e hear'd him and his lairdship crack a mickle power o' gude jokes sittin' by the library fire.''

''For example?'' suggested Lady Berwick, looking at the quaint figure in its gaiters, broad-cloth jacket, and flowered waistcoat.

''Nae ; I wouldna' care tae tell what the Veecar may ha'e considered private ; not that I mightna' tell what passed, on the housetops, for what 'airm there might be in a few cleerical anecdotes.'' And Macfarlane tightened his lips, as much as to infer that not even superior powers to those of Lady Berwick would induce him to repeat conversations he had heard while on duty in the sanctum of his master and a Vicar of the Church.

''Who saw Lord Cleeve off when he left the Vicarage?''

"Weel, a body canna' help bein' sick, and Miss Woodcote had a heedache. Jest as he was leavin', the maid brought him a wee bit note, an' it seemed tae me as if it would tak' the buttons off his waistcoat, he sighed sae when he read it!"

Keziah, who was now standing near her mistress, ventured to say in a low voice, "That affair's at an end."

"Hush!" said her ladyship.

"The victory's yours. I always said so."

"Hush! You speak as you hope."

"As I know," said Keziah.

"Then they did not seem happy together, Lord Cleeve and Miss Woodcote?" said her ladyship, turning from Keziah and her papers to Macfarlane.

"Nae; indeed they looked verra' sad. But may be the Secreetary o' Dorcas had been admeenisterin' some consolation tae them, puir bodies! I ken when she consoled me for my loss I had a verra' bad heedache the next morning whateffer!"

"Is that the usual effect of consolation, Macfarlane?" asked her ladyship, patiently giving him time for further disclosures.

"Weel, may be it were the whaskey I was obleeged tae tak' jest tae get my speerits up agen," he answered, feeling that her ladyship for some reason or other was willing that he should speak with a certain familiarity. He supposed it was on account of his travels. Since his return from America he had been conscious of a greater amount of respect being shown to him at Comberton, though he was but a servant in the Vicar's household,—a privileged one, nevertheless, as he did not forget to remind the others, both at the Farm and the Vicarage.

Further opportunity to show off his wit and air his travelled manners was cut short by the entrance of a footman, preceding two more important visitors.

"The Reverend the Vicar of Comberton-cum-Besford and Miss Woodcote," said the attendant, flinging open the heavy mahogany door.

Her ladyship rose to receive her visitors, Macfarlane picked up his hat and brushed the nap with his sleeve, prior to being hurried back by Keziah to the housekeeper's room, where she had left him to address a much less interested auditor than Lady Berwick.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

OF A CERTAIN RECEPTION IN GROSVENOR SQUARE.

"WELCOME, my dear Susannah! Welcome, Vicar, a thousand times!" said Lady Berwick, in her heartiest manner, first kissing Susannah and then taking the Vicar's hand. He bent over her white kid glove with an air of old-world gallantry. The glove extended above the elbow of her ladyship's well-shaped arm, and a diamond bangle sparkled on her wrist.

"We thank you, Lady Berwick," said the Vicar. "Unfortunately we were delayed, through some slight mistake of Macfarlane's about the hour at which the carriage should be ordered."

"Oh, but, dear friend, you are very early."

"Then I am glad, for I was about to apologise for being late."

"No one arrives at the appointed hour," said her ladyship. "Come and sit by me, Sue, my love."

"Tut! tut!" said the Vicar. "There is no business without punctuality."

"But there may be pleasure," said her ladyship. "You are indeed my first arrivals. This is my sanctum, where only the privileged may come; and the privileged come much later than this. See, dear, this is the reception room."

An attendant drew aside a heavy plush curtain and disclosed a conservatory, filled with orchids and palms of many varieties, that gave upon a spacious salon and gallery, lighted with bunches of silver lamps. The

decorations were mostly white, with dainty water-colour drawings in the panels. The ceiling was frescoed, the general effect being bright and cheerful. The entrance from the grand staircase was draped with a silken canopy that covered an adjacent opening into the conservatory, so that Lady Berwick, during the intervals of receiving, could retire to what she called her sanctum. On each side of the salon was a gallery of pictures with seats in bay-windows, and here and there a buffet, at which every kind of luxurious refreshment was provided. At the further end of the salon a platform had been raised, upon which was already posted a famous string band, that later in the evening played selections from Schubert, Weber, Wagner, Strauss, Mendelssohn, and other great composers; while now and then variety was obtained by the voluntary performances of professional artistes who were among her ladyship's personal friends.

"You must come and help me to receive; will you, dear?" she said.

"You are very kind, dear Lady Berwick. I don't feel quite well; it is the journey, perhaps, and I think I am rather bashful."

"You shall permit Susannah make herself right at home, dear friend," said the Vicar, "and you will soon find her playing her part just as you could wish."

"My dear girl, you are free of the house. Pray consider my private room your own. Go there when you wish; I will take care that you are not disturbed. My dear, if I did not steal away from the chatter of the salon and the continual greetings of my friends, I should never be able to get through the night. I cease to receive in a formal way after the first hour. I have several friends who fill my place quite well while I rest.

They profess to go in search of me, and have other little devices to save me. I make my receptions as informal as is consistent with a reasonable etiquette; it is, in fact, open house at such times; and some of my guests take the liberty to bring uninvited friends of their own."

They had now returned to the sanctum. The servant drew the curtain and retired.

"One of my guests has given me a surprise. It will be no less an astonishment to you, Vicar. Sit down, Susannah, dear; you look pale; you must let me prescribe for you; yes, indeed, you must."

She took from a cabinet a cruet, and poured out a delicate liqueur, which she pressed upon Susannah. The girl sipped the cordial, and declared she felt better. While Lady Berwick had had a presentiment of a triumphant night, Susannah had not been able to bear up against a feeling that something evil was going to happen to her.

"Probably you never heard of Mr. Max Nettleship, though he has written several popular books?"

"A novelist?" asked Susannah.

"Yes; he wrote 'The Heroes of Windy Nook' and 'The Night March.'"

"The name seems familiar to me," said the Vicar.

"He is a gentleman; novelists, you know, are sometimes gentlemen."

"Always, I hope, Lady Berwick. Scott was one of the greatest gentlemen; wrote like one, thought like one, and died a martyr to his high sense of honour."

"Yes, of course," said her ladyship, half inclined to mention one of her pet aversions, who in her opinion wrote novels without thinking it necessary to be a gentleman, either with his pen or without it; but she

wanted to stand well with the Vicar, whose nature was broad, tolerant, and generous.

"And Mr. Nettleship?" asked the Vicar, inquiringly.

"Well, he informed me yesterday that he had recently married, and asked permission to present his wife to me and my friends to-night. An odd, eccentric fellow, sagacious, witty, a member of the Parthenon Club, in the very best Society; and whom do you think he has married? Prepare yourself for a revelation that will, I feel sure, be most agreeable to you both."

Lady Berwick was aware that the secret of Lizzie Melford's misfortune had been well kept from Susannah; but as she continued her explanation she gave a significant glance at the Vicar, that he might not intervene or check her in what she was going to say.

"You remember my little school assistant, Lizzie Melford?"

"Yes," said Susannah, eagerly, "of course I do; you have heard of her?"

"She is Mr. Max Nettleship's wife."

"His wife!" exclaimed the Vicar.

"Really!" said Susannah.

"His wife," repeated Lady Berwick.

"The poor child," said the Vicar; "I am very glad."

"They treated her badly at the Homestead, and she ran away," said Susannah. "She had met Mr. Nettleship, I suppose, at Wulstan, or somewhere; but why did she not let Comberton know that she was safe and happy?"

"An odd girl," said Lady Berwick. "I always thought her flighty, and she certainly was deceitful; read novels on the sly, when we thought she was studying serious books. Probably she had read Net-

tleship's novels; who can tell? It is a strange world."

"It is, indeed," said the Vicar.

At which moment the distant strains of a Wagnerian march filtered through the orchids and plush and made a faint accompaniment to the conversation, that was presently interrupted by the entrance of a footman announcing the first arrivals. As he flung aside the portière for her ladyship to pass through the conservatory into the salon, Keziah entered by the opposite door.

"Excuse me, your ladyship,—a note for Miss Woodcote," she said; and Keziah gave Susannah an envelope, unsealed.

Susannah opened it, and read, "I must see you,—JAMES BRADLEY."

"Is it from any one you know?" the Vicar asked.

"Yes," said Susannah. "May I join you presently? I wish to speak to Keziah."

"Certainly, love, by all means," said her ladyship. "Come, Vicar, give me your arm."

As they emerged from the conservatory into the salon, the first group of guests was announced by a stalwart footman dressed in her ladyship's most ceremonious livery.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hatherstone Bigges; Lord Muskerry, Lady Muskerry; Captain the Honourable John Stammers; Mr. Hilliary Brown; Mrs. and Miss Caine; Sir Henry Mellish and Lady Mellish; the Count Alexis, the Countess Alexis; Mr. Bernard Henry Smith, Lady and the Misses Smith."

During the pauses, when opportunity offered, Lady Berwick introduced the Reverend the Vicar of Comberton-cum-Besford to such guests as stood near her; and presently they had become quite a distinguished

and numerous party. The Vicar was deeply impressed.

The band seemed already to be subdued by the conversation and the continuous announcements.

"Mr. David Hansard, Mrs. Hansard; Mrs. Prentice, Miss Prentice, and Mr. Prentice and Mr. John Prentice junior; Captain Galigan; Major Drew and Lady Montagu-Drew; General Martin-James; Sir Peter Blaney and Miss Blaney; Mr. Archie Peters and Mr. Adolphus Pips."

"That is Dolly Pips, the comedian," said her ladyship in a whisper to the Vicar, seeing that Mr. Hussingtree looked at the genial and jaunty Pips with an inquiring and amused smile.

"Indeed!" said the Vicar. "A comedian; and he looks his profession, I think."

"You have quite an eye for character," Lady Berwick remarked; and she presented the Vicar to the next new comer, the popular incumbent of a city parish, a rubicund well set-up cleric, who introduced the Vicar to his meek little wife.

The guests continued to climb the grand staircase, that was lined with flowers, and as soon as the Vicar was once more at liberty, Lady Berwick presented him to the Countess Montressor, whose article in one of the Reviews, on "Prehistoric Man and Possible Society before the Flood," had created so much stir, by reason of the doubts of the critics whether her ladyship was laughing at them or was in earnest in her "lesson from the ages," which she had endeavoured to people and describe.

While the Vicar was paying deferential court to the literary Countess, he heard a name that he had been conning over in his mind ever since Lady Berwick had

mentioned it. Amidst so many distractions it was difficult to think of anything consecutively for five minutes together; but the announcement of Mr. and Mrs. Max Nettleship brought the Vicar over to the head of the staircase, and he stood by while a neat, well-dressed, middle-aged gentleman was presenting a pretty, smiling, and happy-looking girl to Lady Berwick.

"And here is a gentleman who will be glad to know you, Mr. Nettleship," said her ladyship. "May I be permitted, Vicar; this is Mr. Max Nettleship, of whom I have spoken to you. The Vicar of Comberton-cum-Besford, Mr. Max Nettleship."

"I am glad to meet you, sir," said the Vicar, with a courtly bow. "And your wife?"

Mrs. Nettleship had withdrawn a little apart, under the influence of Lady Berwick, who desired to give her an opportunity of composing herself.

"Lizzie," said Nettleship, looking towards her. The young wife stepped forward, her dark hair giving an extra pallor to her face, for she had felt her heart stand still, as it seemed, at sight of the Vicar. She had been prepared by Max to meet her ladyship; but to be suddenly confronted with the Vicar was an unexpected situation.

"My dear child," said the Vicar, coming forward to meet her, "I am very glad to see you again, very."

He took her hand, in a fatherly way, and held it. "You have caused us a great deal of anxiety, the greater is the relief at finding you again; I congratulate you upon your husband, my dear,—a good fellow, I am sure," and he patted Nettleship on the shoulder. "I have said many a prayer for you, my child; and I feel, as I see you now, that they have been answered,—God bless you both!"

Some of the bystanders were a little amused at the scene, which they did not understand. The Vicar laid his hand upon Mrs. Nettleship's head, as if in the act of publicly blessing her; then turned away, but only to watch her join the other guests, Nettleship smiling and nodding approvingly at the Vicar, who smiled back, while Lady Berwick was saying to everybody near her, "Old friends; not met for years; Mrs. Nettleship was one of the Vicar's most charming parishioners, a delightful creature; Mr. Nettleship is a lucky man."

"You are a good woman," said the Vicar, quietly, to Lady Berwick. "You have been telling them what a charming girl she was, one of my parishioners; and saying that he is to be congratulated."

"I think he is," she said.

"And I truly hope so," replied the Vicar, who at least knew enough of the world to understand how valuable, socially and otherwise, to that newly married pair were Lady Berwick's few words of approval and the more or less public introduction to himself, the white-haired Vicar of a country parish.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

TO THE MUSIC OF SYMPHONY AND SONG.

In the meantime Susannah was realising something of her premonition of trouble.

"I'll go and fetch him, miss," said Keziah. "I believe he would have come into the room without a word, if I hadn't begged him to send you a note of warning."

Before she left the room she drew the curtain.

"What can he want with me? Has he found out at last who dropped the lamp, and why?"

"Well, you might show a bit of manners," said Keziah, as Bradley pushed past her and presented himself before Susannah; "don't point at me."

"I want to speak to Miss Woodcote alone."

"Very well; that is, if Miss Woodcote does not object."

"No, Keziah; please leave us for a few minutes."

Bradley followed Keziah to the door, and saw that it was shut.

"Very sorry to bother you just now, Miss Woodcote, but I came to see you about that job at the Vicarage."

"The robbery at Comberton?" asked Susannah, endeavouring to suppress the tremor in her voice.

"Don't be alarmed, miss. Let me give you a seat."

He placed a chair for her.

"Thank you," she said.

"I mean about the parties that broke into the Vicarage library."

"Pray explain yourself, Mr. Bradley."

"Fact is, Miss Woodcote, I want to save you some annoyance; I always was a lady's man. You see, miss, if you had only told us what you saw——"

"What I saw!"

"It would have saved everybody a world of bother."

"Go on, Mr. Bradley; I am listening, but I don't understand what you mean."

"Ah, miss, I think you do. Young Mr. Tom Hussingtree may be arrested to-night."

"Arrested! Oh, the poor Vicar!" exclaimed Susannah, greatly agitated.

"Don't give way, miss," said Bradley, with an inward smile at his cleverness in getting from Susannah, if not in words, in her manner, the confession he so much desired.

"I am not giving way. Don't mind me; keep nothing back; let me know all you have to say, and quickly."

"You'll have to be called as a witness, you see,—so I came to warn you. I never thought any trouble too great that would serve a lady. Now, the best thing you can do is to go abroad, some place where it is difficult to find you, and it may be we can do without you; of course, we must, if we can't get at you."

"It is impossible! Oh, Mr. Bradley, for his father's sake, let Tom go; don't think of me, think of his father. It was for the Vicar, so kind, so good, so beloved, that I held my peace."

"Nay, dear young lady, you know you did more than hold your peace; you said you knew nothing of

the lamp, that you didn't drop the letter; and you must have told the Vicar you were asleep all the time."

"You mean—that I lied?"

"Nay, I did not say that."

"You mean that a lie by implication is nevertheless a lie?"

"If you put it so, I——"

"You mean," continued Susannah, raising her voice from a whisper almost to a cry, "to denounce Tom Hussingtree on my evidence! It is a dastardly thing to do."

"That is strong language, Miss Woodcote, to an officer who is only here in your own interest."

From an attitude of defiance the poor girl sank immediately to one of supplication. And all the time the music of a Strauss waltz could be heard in the distance.

"What is to be done? What can be done?" she exclaimed, beside herself. "Oh, if I could buy your silence! Not for my own sake," and she took from her neck a diamond brooch. "Take this as a token; it is worth a great deal, and name your own price!"

"My dear young lady, you do not know what you are saying."

"Oh, yes, I do," she replied, clinging for support to the back of a chair. "Yes, I do; I will give anything in the world I have, any money, if——"

She had raised her voice slightly, against the competition of a chorus from *Carmen* that had succeeded the Strauss walk in the salon.

"You are not yourself, Miss Woodcote; you are talking at random."

"I believe you would help the Vicar, with no other reward than the consciousness that you had done some-

thing for a kind and honourable man. Oh, Mr. Bradley, at any cost spare him, spare us all from the shame of Tom Hussingtree's arrest !''

''I must do my duty,'' said the Inspector, ''but I want to do it as gently as I can ; that's why I came to see you.''

Voices were heard in the conservatory ; a hand was upon the curtain.

''A most delightful composition,'' the Vicar was heard saying, ''vivacious and tuneful.''

''It is the Vicar,'' said Susannah. ''In the name of heaven, wait outside,—anything,—don't let him see you yet !—I'll come to you.''

She almost forced Bradley through the doorway and closed it, as the Vicar and Lady Berwick entered.

''And the song, the ballad the young lady sang before the movement from Strauss, a delightful song—what did you say it was ?''

''The title is the first words of the refrain, 'That is How We Maidens Woo,' '' her ladyship replied ; noting at the same time that Susannah was making an effort to appear calm, the while she was evidently struggling with some deep emotion.

''And a charming melody ! Let me see, how did it go?'' said the Vicar, humming a few bars of the tune. ''Is that it ?''

''Yes. What an ear you have, Vicar !''

''You should have heard it, Susannah,'' said the Vicar, quite oblivious of his ward's anxious face and Lady Berwick's watchful observation of the girl. ''I like the lines, 'Sighing when our hearts are glad, Saying No with our lips, While the heart says Yes.' There's satire in that, of a description that does not sting ; and the moral's good, too !''

"You are quizzing us," said her ladyship, touching the Vicar's arm protestingly with her fan.

"No, indeed; you should know me better. She sighs when she is glad, says No when she means Yes, that is deceit; losing her lovers by such poor strategy is poetical justice, and the moral——"

"Many of the songs you may hear to-night have morals.—'The Roman-nosed Pig' has a moral," said her ladyship, with a serious face, that broke into smiles at the Vicar's reply.

"Dear me! has it? I am glad. This combination of precept with amusement is very pleasant, very. My dear Susannah, I wish you had been with us, to hear the song. The lady who sang, by the way, what was her name, did you say? Rather a remarkable name?"

"Miss Lister Plantagenet."

"Was that the name? It does not strike me as odd; but it did; surely you said——?"

"Lottie Plantagenet," replied her ladyship; "her friends call her Lottie."

"Not quite euphonious with Plantagenet, is it? But what a charming woman. Talks as well as she sings; and she is an actress. Well, I am surprised, really."

A knock at the private door (whence Bradley had been so unceremoniously pushed out by Susannah); and Keziah entered, somewhat hurriedly.

"Lord Cleeve, your ladyship," she said. "He wished to come this way; didn't desire to be announced; said he would prefer to wait until you left the gallery."

And thereupon his lordship entered, looking both handsome and distinguished, wearing the small collar of some noble order below his necktie.

"I am indeed fortunate in finding all my friends at

once," he said, as he returned Lady Berwick's cordial greetings.

While Lady Berwick took the opportunity to cross over to Susannah, the Vicar took his friend's arm. He was overflowing with a desire to confess how much he was enjoying himself, and the injustice he had done to what Lord Cleeve called the Bohemian character of Lady Berwick's assemblies.

"My dear Cleeve, I am ashamed of myself. All these years I have been doing a great injustice to a class of Society I neither knew nor understood. Delightful people. One of the most charming women I ever met, lady-like, refined, cultured, is an actress!"

"Yes; I know many such, dear friend."

"Do you, really!" said the Vicar, drawing Cleeve still further aside and addressing him in a whisper. "This lady speaks in an educated voice, and with an eloquence worthy of the Church itself; and yet appears, I am told, on the stage, as a boy, takes the part of Rosalind in 'As You Like It.' But it is her profession, and I begin to think that I almost agree with her, that the Stage comprehends not the least noble of the arts."

And now it was Cleeve's turn to say "Really!" The Vicar was speaking with the enthusiasm of a discoverer; he had found a new world.

"I thought you would be surprised," added Cleeve.

"Surprised and delighted," said the Vicar.

The plush curtains had remained open, and the music and talk of the fashionable crowd could be distinctly heard. While the Vicar was speaking there was a lull for a few seconds, and then some applause. The opening bars of a song were struck on a piano.

"What is that?" said the Vicar, turning to Lady Berwick. "Some one else is going to sing?"

"Yes; Mr. Dolly Pips."

"Dear me! the comedian you spoke of?"

"Yes; he is going to sing a song Mr. Toole used to sing in what he called one of his classic plays."

"Mr. Dolly Pips! Such a pleasant-looking little gentleman! Oh! I must hear him; I would not miss a line of it."

Lord Cleeve and Lady Berwick exchanged glances of amusement, and Susannah was trying her hardest to look interested.

"Do you think I might take Susannah to hear it?" said the Vicar, softly, to Lady Berwick; as if it had suddenly occurred to him that, after all, perhaps, a clergyman and his ward had strayed into questionable society; but he dismissed the unworthy thought the next moment.

"Oh, I think so," said Lady Berwick, with a meaning smile.

"Now you are mocking me," said the Vicar. "Well, I deserve it. What is the song?"

"It is called 'He always came Home to his Tea.'"

"Oh, that's domestic! There cannot be any harm in that. Come along, Susannah, my love."

"Thank you, dear, I would rather be excused. I will join you by and by."

"And I have a word to say to Miss Woodcote," said Cleeve. "May I bring her presently, Lady Berwick?"

"Certainly, dear friend," said her ladyship, in her most gracious and purring manner. There was an emphasis on the adjective that caused Cleeve to turn and look at her.

"Come, Lady Berwick," said the Vicar, impatiently, "Mr. Pips is beginning."

"You will not be long?" said her ladyship to Cleeve.

"My dear Cleeve," said the Vicar, as he hurried Lady Berwick away, "I am delighted with these people!"

Lord Cleeve followed the Vicar and their hostess, and saw that an attendant closed the conservatory door as they went into the gallery. He himself drew the heavy portière of the small drawing-room.

"I hope you are enjoying yourself, Miss Woodcote."

"Yes," she said, with a sigh that belied her word.

"I am sorry I could not come to town with you."

"It was arranged that you should."

"It was."

"And the Vicar was greatly disappointed."

"It had occurred to me, from something you said, that you would prefer that I did not."

"Something I said?"

"Yes; but let us not speak of it now. I came here to-night to seek an opportunity to say a few words to you before I leave England for some time."

"Yes?" she said.

"Indeed, that was my only purpose. I will not pain you by telling you how deeply I am interested in your welfare, how much I admire, how much I—respect you. I want to bid you Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!"

"I am going on a long journey to America, Japan, Australasia,—round the world, in fact."

"But that is no new idea, Lord Cleeve; you have often talked of it."

"Yes ; but I sail to-night. Here are my papers and tickets."

He produced his pocket-book, and showed her a document, as much to convince her as himself, for he had been somewhat hasty in concluding his arrangements.

"It is dated, you see, Steamship Agamemnon ;—she leaves the London Docks at two in the morning. My luggage is on board ; my carriage will call here for me. I shall not return, perhaps for years."

"Nothing but trouble ! Nothing but trouble !" she said, her head in her hands.

"Trouble!" repeated Lord Cleeve, bending towards her. "Is my going a trouble?"

"It is, indeed."

"Have you any other trouble?"

"Oh, yes ! A great trouble ; and the greater because I may not tell it to you."

"I think you might."

"I cannot."

"I am a man of experience, Miss Woodcote. I have seen the world. You cannot doubt my faith or that I am governed by any idle curiosity. Tell me what it is that has so disturbed you?"

"Oh, I cannot, I cannot !" she said, her voice trembling with emotion.

"I can see that you are very unhappy. I had not thought to speak to you of my love. But I will now, because I think I may be able to serve you ; and when I tell you that you are to me the dearest object in the world, you will not doubt me. Again, I am going away for years, and the secret will be away with me wherever I may go. You have nothing to fear from one so bound to you in esteem and respect, and I dare

even to say, in a love that nothing can change; let me help you?"

"I never doubted your friendship," she said, wiping away her tears, and speaking now firmly and with calmness, "I do not doubt your love; God bless you, wherever you may go! You will not question me when I tell you that I cannot reveal the cause of my distress and sorrow to you, and I pray that it may never be known."

"I bow to your decision. We may not have so favourable an opportunity to say Good-bye."

"Good-bye," she said, holding out her hand.

Cleeve took it, and pressed it fervently to his lips.

Lady Berwick had lifted the portière sufficiently to feel deeply interested in what was passing; but she now deemed it wise to interrupt the interview.

"Oh, Sue, dear, don't you want to join the Vicar? He is continually asking for you. Just now he is chatting with Mr. Pips. Why, Susannah, love, you have been crying. My darling, what is it? You are not well, and that wicked Cleeve has been telling you he is going away. How dare you, sir!"

She shook her fan at Cleeve, and drew an arm around Susannah, who was in fear of Bradley's return, for surely he would be tired of waiting. But Lady Berwick had arranged for another visitor, whose presence she hoped would be the means of sending Lord Cleeve away with other views in his mind than those which Susannah had reawakened; that is, if he went away at all; for Lady Berwick hoped to detain him.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE."

"LORD CLEEVE will take you into the gallery and give you some refreshment, Susannah. I declare I will not allow you to remain here any longer. Go, dear, and take at least one turn round the rooms."

Lord Cleeve bowed to her ladyship, who felt so secure in her plans that she no longer feared the fascinations of Susannah. She knew that Lord Cleeve was going away very soon, within the hour she believed, and she was anxious to make that last hour pleasant to him.

"Will you come?" said Cleeve.

"Thank you," said Susannah, her hand upon his arm.

The lights and the crowd of people swam before her for a few minutes; a sudden giddiness seized her, and, almost fearing she might fall, she leaned heavily upon Lord Cleeve's arm. He thrilled at her touch. It occurred to him that he might after all be making a Quixotic sacrifice in leaving England; but the next moment he as strongly felt that he was doing the right thing, and perhaps even the best, in view of his dearest hopes.

"You are not well," he said, softly, and looking down into her face.

"I am better now, thank you."

"It is the perfume of those exotics, I think, in her ladyship's room and the heat of the conservatory, that have made you feel faint. Let us walk towards yonder window."

"No, it is not that, Lord Cleeve. Oh, if I dared tell you!"

Then suddenly she paused, and said, "Listen a moment, but don't look to your right until we return. I think that must be Superintendent Bradley who has just gone into the conservatory."

"Superintendent Bradley!"

"Yes. I saw him a little while ago; he had an overcoat on, buttoned to the throat; he is now in evening dress."

"Bradley in evening dress!"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"You have great influence with him?"

"Yes, if it is necessary to exercise it. Is he here with Lady Berwick's permission?"

"I don't know."

"It is a common thing to have a detective about on these occasions. But Bradley, of all men! A clumsy, ignorant, country policeman, what can he be doing here? I'll ask Lady Berwick."

"No; don't do that. Watch him, Lord Cleeve; watch him. Don't let him do what he intends.—If you must go abroad, first send him away, and compel him to——"

By this time they were again near the conservatory. Lord Cleeve looked at his watch. It was past eleven; his vessel was timed to sail at two.

"Oh, Lord Cleeve, if I dared tell you! It may be necessary; I pray that it may not be. Don't you see a figure behind that great palm on the left?"

"Yes. I will take you in, and rejoin you immediately."

While Susannah was engaged in a vain endeavour to

guard her pathetic secret, and almost within earshot of Mr. and Mrs. Nettleship, who were chatting with an old friend of Lizzie's husband, a perfect stranger to all of them was relating to a playwright the triumphant end of Luke Fenton. "It is in the specials," he said, "and as I read it I thought of your idea of a military play."

"Very kind of you, old fellow," said the playwright, somewhat superciliously.

"Not at all," replied the unsophisticated friend. "I know you are always looking out for dramatic incidents. If I was one of you fellows, I'd sooner take ideas from the newspapers than look up old plays or new novels."

"Quite right," said the other, with a pitying smile; for the good-natured friend was rich, and had been known to put a couple of thousand pounds into a theatrical syndicate, and to have lost it cheerfully.

"This fellow, I think he was in a Dorsetshire regiment, seems to have led a charmed life for a time. Nobody knew him in the regiment, until he joined it; but he had influence with the commander; a noble lord had said a good word for him. The fellow was a corporal or sergeant, I forget which; there was some jealousy, it seems, about the way he was pushed on and got to the front; but, by Jove, sir, when there was fighting to be done, he became a hero, not only with his comrades, but in the estimation of the enemy."

"Yes," said the playwright. "If you were one of us fellows, as you just now remarked, you would get on with your story."

"But I am laying it in, as you say. I heard you telling Timbs, the critic, that the First Act of a play should do no more than just lay in the story."

"Well?"

"Well, old chap, it is necessary that you should know something of my hero; I am laying him in."

"Laying him out, you mean," said the playwright.

"Thank you," replied the unsophisticated friend.

"Don't mention it," said the playwright.

"I won't," said the other.

"What are you two fellows wrangling about?" inquired the editor of the particular "special" which the friend of the dramatist had quoted.

"Hawkins is giving me his idea of a dramatic incident and a military hero."

"It's the story of Sergeant Fenton, in your latest edition," said Hawkins, somewhat crushed by his impatient auditor.

"And Hawkins is right, if he sees that very remarkable narrative from a dramatic point of view."

"Tell our arrogant friend the story," said Hawkins.

"Oh, well, it is soon told; you might learn it from the head-lines really—'A charmed life,'—'The Hero of Pindi and the Khyber'—"'And they smote them hip and thigh,"'—'Truth Stranger than Fiction.' His name was Luke Fenton. Nobody knew him. The regiment believed him to be a scholar. He never drank, but frequently prayed. In the hottest engagement he was as cool as if he had been on parade. Before he delivered his shot, or at the order to charge, he would shout, 'And they smote them hip and thigh, from Dan even unto Beersheba!' and his bullet never missed its mark. His bayonet was the deadliest in the regiment. At Pindi, under the cruellest fire, he brought in wounded comrades. Between Tirah and Bara he left the camp at night, surprised an outpost of the enemy and rescued a Sikh, who had been taken prisoner and would have been tortured. Cut off from his

own company, the next day a handful of Ghurkas made a gallant stand for him, but found themselves in their turn under a concentrated fire from a rocky shelter above them. Leaving several dead in the defile, they obtained cover, and for a time with advantage. Their commander killed, they elected the English sergeant to lead them. They held their position for hours, Fenton, with his biblical shibboleth, eventually rising in their estimation to the dignity of a god. No matter how he exposed himself, the Lee-Metford bullets went crashing into the rocks, missing him as if by a miracle; and then would follow the shout of the red-coated hero and a new death amongst the enemy. At last, signals from a village down in the valley commanded the Ghurka post to come down. Fenton saw that the enemy was being reinforced and that a few of them had already collected in front to cut him off. Gathering his little company together, and creeping for a while as if in an opposite direction, he suddenly led them against the enemy in their front, and swept them into the defile below like chaff before a tempest. The village reached, Fenton received an ovation, and the officer in command informed him that he should mention him for the Victoria Cross; but hardly had the cheers died away, than a deadly fire was opened upon the village from an unexpected quarter. The line of march had been through the most terrific complications of rocks and mysterious defiles; troops perhaps never fought in so difficult a country. The little company held their own for a time; but it soon became evident that the position was untenable. The young lieutenant in command ordered a retreat to a post further down the valley, which could, however, only be reached with any possible chance of success in single file, one man at a time,

taking advantage of every point of shelter. The enemy had no suspicion of the gradual withdrawal of this remnant of the rear-guard until most of the men had won their way to the post. When it came to the remaining two, the officer and Fenton, it was the hero with his war-cry, 'From Dan even unto Beersheba,' who was last. At the one open spot over which the retreat had to be made the lieutenant was struck down. The next moment Fenton was by his side. As he lifted the officer to carry him in, a bullet struck the wounded man, and the two came to the ground, the officer dead. Fenton staggered to his feet and crept behind a bare crag that for a time protected him as a shield. Presently, however, half-a-dozen of the enemy rushed into the gorge, where Fenton had found shelter. Driven into the open, the brave fellow stood at bay, rifle in hand, head erect, a very picture of splendid warfare. The Afridis might have shot him twenty times over. They did not; but advanced upon him, crouching for a spring, evidently bent on taking him alive. Then the defiant figure was seen to imitate their own movements. There was something of the forward crouch of the tiger in his advance upon them, culminating in a deadly spring, deadly for him as for the enemy. The struggle was brief. The Afridis fell thick around him. At last, flinging up his arms, he sank down upon the last of his victims. The next day, reinforcements having arrived, the rear-guard for a time assumed the offensive, and they brought in Fenton's body. Not a scrap of paper or anything, to indicate who or what he was or whence he came, was found upon him. He was buried near the spot where he fell, Ghurkas, Sikhs, Gordon Highlanders, and Dorsets paying the last honours with impressive signs of admiration and sorrow."

"I beg your pardon, Hawkins, for seeming to discount the story, much obliged to you, old fellow, for planting it in my memory," said the playwright. "And I thank God that the age of gallantry and sentiment is not extinct. There is a love story behind that biblical shibboleth, you may be sure ; if there is not, we must invent one. Good-night. I want to say a word to my hostess."

Susannah saw Lord Cleeve disappear among the palms ; but almost the next moment he was again by her side, and simultaneously with the entrance of the Vicar and a strange gentleman.

"Bless me !" said Lady Berwick, "here's the Vicar and Mr. Pips—High Church and Low Comedy."

"Cleeve, I have been listening to Mr. Pips."

"Ah, my lord, how does your lordship do?" said Pips, going over to Lord Cleeve, and speaking in a quick, odd way, and with a jaunty shake of the head.

"Oh ! you know each other?" said the Vicar.

"Oh, yes ; prosperity makes us acquainted, etc., as the poet sings, eh, Mr. Pips?" said Lord Cleeve.

"Never heard of that particular poet," said Pips ; "quite a respectable chap, no doubt."

"No doubt," said Lord Cleeve, taking the heavy hand of Pips, and shaking it cordially.

"Not seen your lordship a month of Sundays," said Pips, "until last night, at the Queen's."

"I only looked in for a few minutes," said his lordship, "on my way to the club. Sorry you had a frost."

"A frost, in May ; it is rather late," said the Vicar ; "though I remember snow on a first of June."

"Oh, we get frosts at the Queen's all the year round," said Pips.

"I presume you are very much exposed, Mr. Pips?"

"No ; but I wish the critics were."

Lady Berwick laughed, and explained the tangle of metaphors to Susannah.

"A frost in the profession," said Lord Cleeve, "is said to mean——"

"The profession?" said the Vicar, interrupting Cleeve. "I beg your pardon?"

"Yes," said Pips, "'pro.' for short. I am a pro.; there are several others about, thanks to Lady Berwick's hospitality."

"Well, a 'frost,' my dear Hussingtree," said Cleeve, "means a failure."

"You will learn something to-night," said Lady Berwick, laughing.

"Yes. Comberton, I find, is not all the world," said the Vicar; "not, indeed, very much of England."

"They amuse you, Vicar?"

"Amuse me! I am charmed. Mr. Pips has just been singing a most curious and strange ditty—'Iky-tickey-iky'—really, I can't remember the odd refrain," said the Vicar, with a hearty laugh at the remembrance of it.

"'Icky-ticky-igh-tall-hat,'" said her ladyship; "has he been singing that nonsense?"

"Well, I don't know about its being nonsense," said the Vicar, "but it made me laugh; and if a thing is perfectly innocent and makes us laugh, it is good and has its uses, as the flowers of the field have theirs." The old man waved his hand, as if he were addressing a congregation.

"Now, isn't the reverend gentleman perfectly splendid!" said Pips, in his nervous, comical way. "He's got no prejudice, he hasn't."

"I trust not, Mr. Pips; and to make that still clearer to you, I will tell you what I will do, young gentleman."

"Young gentleman!" said Pips, with a comical bow. "You do me proud, sir."

"As I was saying, I will tell you what I will do; you come and hear me preach, and I will go and see you act."

"Tell you what I'll do, dear old gentleman, tell you what'll do," said Pips; "you come and act for my benefit, and I'll go and preach for yours."

"Pips, Pips!" said Cleeve, in what might be called a stage-whisper, only intended for Pips. "Don't let us forget ourselves."

"I trust I shall always act for the benefit of all my fellow-creatures, Mr. Pips," said the Vicar, with much gravity; "but I think you will do more good by making people laugh than by attempting to preach."

"Right you are!" said Pips. "Say no more, most reverend sir. Shall we have a split?"

"I trust not, Mr. Pips,—Morality and Art should never be separated."

Pips looked at Cleeve with an inquiring wink.

"Collier and Congreve did not more misunderstand one another,—a split is a simple soda divided. Let me instruct you, Vicar, and join you; come."

"Then I will have a split with you, Mr. Pips," said the Vicar; and they went, laughing, through the conservatory to the gallery.

Mr. Inspector Bradley was no longer standing sentinel behind Lady Berwick's palms; but Cleeve exercised a watchful eye as he passed into the gallery, and presently left the Vicar and Pips and Mr. Nettleship discussing Art with an eminent Royal Academician and a popular journalist, to the accompaniment of a little wine and a great deal of music.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

SUSANNAH'S SECRET.

"SUSANNAH, dear," said Lady Berwick, "I wish you would cheer up; while we are laughing and all in high spirits, you are sad as Dido."

"My head aches a little," said Susannah; as, indeed, it did, and well it might.

"Is it only your head, dear? Did Lord Cleeve say anything to you that has made you sad? Has he said Good-bye?"

"Yes."

"For a long time?"

"For years."

"Ah, well, you will be consoled. I have been hoping all the night long to cheer you with the presence of a guest who should have been here hours ago. I have a great surprise for you, Sue, my dear!"

Lady Berwick, at risk of ruffling her own gay feathers, took the girl into her arms. "Such a surprise!"

She had timed this announcement well. Keziah put her head in at the door. Lady Berwick went to her. Keziah whispered a few words.

"Very well; keep the door closed."

Keziah disappeared. Lady Berwick went into the conservatory, and beckoned an attendant.

"Fasten the conservatory door; say your mistress does not wish to be disturbed for a few minutes." As the man departed, she drew the curtain, with a firm, determined hand. Susannah watched her with some astonishment.

"Such a surprise, dear!" repeated her ladyship.

"Another surprise?" Susannah answered.

"What other have you had, dear?"

"Don't ask me, Lady Berwick."

"Lord Cleeve has been saying something that troubles you?"

"No, no; it is not that. I am a miserable girl!"

"You'll be happy enough soon, my child; wait one moment." And her ladyship went out at the door.

"Happy?" said Susannah, to herself. "I shall never be happy again! Oh, I wish I knew what I ought to do. I wonder if it was right to call Lord Cleeve's attention to Bradley? I seem to be helpless. And while I stand in doubt and fear, neglecting the warning of Superintendent Bradley, who declared he only came to serve me, Tom may be taken. Then what is to become of my secret? what will they think of my word?"

She was pacing the room in her agitation, when, suddenly, she was confronted by Lady Berwick and Tom Hussingtree.

"There, my dear, sweet little Sue, now you will be happy!" exclaimed Lady Berwick, triumphantly.

"How are you, Susannah?" said Tom, who was dressed in the most correct of evening attire. He carried his crush hat under his arm, while he thrust his handkerchief into his cuff, with the air of an imitation aristocrat in a modern comedy.

Susannah stood as one stunned. Lady Berwick drew the portière aside and slipped out, that she might bring the Vicar, to witness the return of his handsome and prosperous son, come to claim the reward of his constancy and success.

"You don't seem very glad to see me?" said Tom.

"Did you think I should?" the girl replied, facing him, with steady eyes and in an unflinching attitude.

"I'm not a conceited fellow ; but I did."

"Oh, Tom, how could you come here !"

"How could I ? I heard you were here, or I should have been at the Vicarage to-night. I took London on my way. Thought I'd like to make a call of ceremony on Lady Berwick."

"Worse and worse !" said the girl.

"Worse and worse ! What do you mean by this cold manner ? What is it ? Rather cruel after eighteen months' absence and hard work. Have you forgotten your promise ?"

"No."

"Didn't you get my letter, saying I was coming ?"

"Yes."

He moved towards a cabinet, and laid his hat upon it.

"You received it ?"

"Yes."

She never once moved her eyes from his face. His own fell before them. He began to feel that Lady Berwick had somehow or other entrapped him, instead of Susannah.

"You are trifling with me," he said. "Don't look at me in that forbidding way. What's the meaning of it ? Do you want to back out of your promise ?"

"Do you ask me to keep it ?"

She stood at bay ; but without fear ; while he feared, he knew not what.

"Yes."

"Is that what you came here for ?"

"I came here to ask you to fix the day for our marriage."

"And do you dare to mention marriage to me, after what has passed ?"

Lady Berwick had assured him, in her letters to New

York, that the secret of Lizzie Melford's disappearance from Comberton was carefully kept from Susannah. What then could she mean by referring "to what has passed"? She could know nothing else against him, at least nothing more than she might have known before; and yet he hesitated to meet her challenge.

"Well, you see—won't you sit down? and let me sit——?"

She waved him back.

"Well, as you please. You are devilish hard, I must say."

"You were saying that you came here to ask me to fix the day for our marriage; I replied, do you dare to mention marriage to me after what has occurred?"

"All right, all right. When I went away, you were pledged to be my wife. The secret was to be kept for a year. You haven't given me up because I am here before my time, because I've been more successful than I ever hoped to be in a new world? You haven't promised to marry Lord Cleeve as well as me?"

"You should be the last man in the world to insult me, after all I have endured for you," she said; and for the moment sank, overcome, into a seat, and vainly endeavoured to keep back her tears.

"There, you needn't cry about it," he said, attempting to take her hand; whereupon she rose to her feet and repelled him.

"Do not dare to come near me!" she said.

And it was at this moment that Lady Berwick had prepared her happy surprise for the Vicar.

"You say I should be the last man to insult you—not that I mean to insult you—why should I, when I love you?"

And once more he was about to approach her.

"If you touch me, I will cry out and have you thrust into the street. Oh, no, no! My God, what am I saying?"

"That's what I want to know," said Tom, facing her. "Tell me what you mean by 'what has passed,' and all the rest of it, at least, before you order me to leave Lady Berwick's house."

"I do not order you. But I will explain."

"If you please," said Tom, as he flung himself carelessly into a chair.

"You ask me to do so?"

"I demand it. It is surely my right."

"Let us advance or retreat, dear Lady Berwick," said the Vicar, in an anxious whisper, to the lady of the house; but she clung to his arm. She had lost her nerve; she felt that she had neither the power to enter the room nor to withdraw; and in a moment the voice of Susannah, with her pathetic story, held them both spell-bound. It galled the Vicar to be an eaves-dropper; but Lady Berwick had inveigled him into that undignified position.

"You shall be obeyed," said the girl. "Your presence is associated with a scene which is engraven upon my memory, never to be effaced; it haunts me night and day; it is burnt into my heart and soul; it makes my life a wretched mockery. Shall I recall it?"

"Go on," he replied, defiantly. "Go on; let's have it!"

"It is a peaceful winter's night. Your father has just gone to rest. I, too, have retired; but I return to the library, to find your letter, which I have dropped by the organ. I am alone in the room. There is a noise at the shutters. A man enters. He unlocks the safe."

Tom moved uneasily in his chair, and bit his lips.

"The sight of that man fascinates me. As he carries off the plunder I see his face."

Tom rose, staggered towards the door; then sat down again.

"I creep out of the room, lock the door, and go to my chamber. I hear the alarm-bell. I pretend to be asleep. That is the lie I enact when the Vicar, your father, comes to my door. And that is the lie I have told, by word and deed, ever since; I, who prided myself on my truthfulness and honesty! But I am screening the Vicar's only son."

Tom sank into his chair, his face in his hands.

The Vicar, putting aside Lady Berwick, entered the room.

"And you," continued Susannah, her voice rising, almost in tones of declamation,—"and you upbraid me! You insult the woman who has shielded you with falsehood in deed and word! You have the heart to think that I had selfishly broken my word to you for another! Since I may not marry either of you, and Lord Cleeve is leaving England, I confess that, looking deep into my heart, I have learnt, too late, that I do love Lord Cleeve. Heaven help me!"

With which touching declaration, Susannah buried her face in her hands and wept.

Tom, utterly bewildered in his terrible defeat, looked round the room, to meet the Vicar and Lady Berwick advancing upon him, the Vicar almost rudely resisting Lady Berwick, who was striving to hold him back.

"At last!" said the Vicar, his voice trembling with passion,—"at last I know how base and cruel a son Heaven has thought fit to afflict me with! I will waste no words upon you, sir. God knows I had hoped to have been able to forgive you, and take you home

again. Leave this house, sir, and never let me see your face again !"

Tom would have dashed out of the room on the instant, but felt as if he were riveted to the spot, Bewildered, and abashed, he bent his head before his father's denunciation ; while Susannah, suddenly starting up, exclaimed, "Oh, what have I done? What have I done? Let me think. Has any one seen Mr. Bradley ?"

"Mr. Bradley !" repeated Lady Berwick, pale and trembling.

"Don't let him come in here ! Fasten the doors. Oh, Vicar ! oh, my dear, they are looking for your son, to arrest him !"

Lord Cleeve, who had been carrying out Susannah's mission in regard to Bradley, entered the room at the moment.

"Oh, save him, save him !" exclaimed Susannah, appealing to his lordship.

"For your sake,—and yours, dear friend," turning to the Vicar, Cleeve replied, hurriedly, "I will, at any cost ! Bradley has told me all. There is no time to lose."

Tom looked up, with parted lips and a movement as if he would approach Lord Cleeve.

"Listen, Tom," said his lordship, going towards him. "The police have taken your friend, Jim. They are waiting for you. There is only one chance of escape."

"What is it ?" Tom asked, in a hoarse, anxious voice.

While he was speaking, Lord Cleeve was hurriedly writing a note on a leaf of his pocket-book. Handing it to Tom, who took it as eagerly as if it might have been a reprieve from the gallows, Lord Cleeve said, "At the private door is my brougham, and my servant, Godfrey. Give this note to Godfrey ; it instructs him

that you are to travel in my place, that you will be his master until he has further orders from me."

"Lord Cleeve!" exclaimed the Vicar, as if about to protest; but his lordship waved back any objection.

Taking from his pocket-book a bundle of papers, Cleeve continued, "These are tickets for Australia, and beyond. The Agamemnon sails at two in the morning."

Handing Tom the documents, he looked at his watch; and with the tickets he had included sundry Bank of England notes.

"It is now twelve; the vessel sails at two. You will find plenty of luggage in my state-room; use it as if it were your own. You need not change the name on the passengers' list; I will communicate with the company. Report to me your plans on arriving at Brindisi, and at Sydney."

"Lord Cleeve, if it is possible to redeem the past, I will do it!" exclaimed Tom.

"It is always possible to repent and atone," said the Vicar, with a longing look at his son.

"Father!" said Tom, bursting into tears.

"Oh, my unhappy son!" exclaimed the Vicar, breaking down, "Good-bye, God forgive you!"

"Come, Tom; come," said Cleeve. "Bradley may be here any moment, and then it might be too late."

Tom needed no further hint, but rushed for the door and disappeared; and hardly had the door closed upon him, when Bradley walked in from the conservatory, once more in his long overcoat.

"Step this way, Bradley," said Cleeve; and, motioning to the others not to interrupt them, he took Bradley to the further end of the room, and, offering him a seat by Lady Berwick's desk, they sat down in earnest conversation.

"My dear child," said the Vicar, approaching Susannah, "I heard your broken-hearted confession. It is in your power to obliterate some of the agony my son's perfidy has caused me."

"My dear guardian, my more than father, my heart seeks no higher happiness than to prove my devotion to you."

"You have more than proved it, my child. Has she not, dear Lady Berwick?"

Her ladyship was torn with a bitter struggle to disguise her disappointment at the turn events had taken. Her game of life, played as they play chess, had entered upon the last moves, in which she perceived defeat. But she was a woman of subtle resource; she would affect to make the game a mere friendly contest; it should end in a draw, or stale-mate; and nobody should know how desperately she had played to win, nor what the stake.

She took Susannah's face between her hands, kissed her on the forehead, and shook the Vicar by the hand with unusual empressment. They could hear the close of Lord Cleeve's conversation with Bradley as Lady Berwick turned her eyes in his direction.

"As I said before, you are the Lord-Lieutenant," said Bradley, "and I am ready to take my orders from your lordship."

"Then postpone this business until to-morrow, at my request. You shall not find me unmindful of the obligation. Call upon me before luncheon."

"I thank your lordship," said Bradley, rising and making his customary military salute. "Glad to get rid of the affair in that way. Yours respectfully."

He comprehended the entire company in this last remark, and left the room by way of the conservatory,

whence came the not inopportune sounds of Mendelssohn's "Wedding March."

"Lord Cleeve! The Vicar, and I, knew your secret before you confessed it on a certain never-to-be-forgotten day. We are now possessed of another that is only a few minutes old. And yet we have kept it long enough. Have we not, Vicar, dear friend?"

"You are a charming woman," the Vicar replied.

"Don't mind me," said her ladyship, with her most gracious smile, and purring in her gentlest and most seductive way. "Will you tell Lord Cleeve this short-lived secret, or shall I?"

"I will be ruled by you," said the Vicar, once more under the widow's spell. "Woman's wit is always right."

"Nay, it is a secret I had no right to hear. You, yourself, shall be the happy messenger."

"Nor is it, indeed, my secret," said the Vicar, "since it was not volunteered to me."

Then, all blushes and confusion, Susannah, releasing herself from the Vicar, looked Lord Cleeve in the face; and without another word, she was in his arms.

The Vicar turned to Lady Berwick, who was very pale.

"My dear Lady Berwick, you are overcome with joy. God bless you!"

"You are too kind to me," she replied; and once more addressing the lovers, she said, "Well, dear friends, is the great secret told at last?"

"Thank you, yes, Lady Berwick," Lord Cleeve replied.

"Let me be the first to kiss and congratulate you, my love," said Lady Berwick.

"My dear, dear friend!" whispered Susannah.

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